

Interview with John J. Helble

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

JOHN J. HELBLE

Interviewed by: Thomas F. Conlon

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Q: Today is April 5, 1996. This is an interview with retired Foreign Service Officer John J. Helble on behalf of the Foreign Affairs Oral History Program. I am Thomas F. Conlon. John, could you begin, as we usually do, with something about your background—where and when you were born, where you went to school, how you got interested in the Foreign Service, and so on.

HELBLE: I was born on August 4, 1934, in Appleton, Wisconsin. I spent my childhood and school days there and graduated in 1952 from Appleton High School. I went on to the University of Wisconsin in the fall of 1952 and did a two-year program of integrated liberal studies under a project that they had at the University at that time. Then I followed a major in international relations.

I became interested in the Foreign Service as a result of my father's influence. He was a public servant during his entire life and had a deep interest in government. He was interested in foreign affairs and, to the extent that his means permitted, he liked to travel abroad and read extensively about it. He frequently talked about his experiences and shared his knowledge with me on foreign affairs. So when I started on my major in my junior year at the University of Wisconsin, I undertook to focus on the potential of the

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Foreign Service—despite considerable concern from a number of my professors, who thought that my grades would not make it possible for me to enter the Foreign Service.

Q: John, what year was this?

HELBLE: It was 1954-1955. My professors generally thought that, in view of my performance during my first two years, I would not be successful in passing the Foreign Service exam. However, I persisted. I took the Foreign Service written exam as a junior and missed passing it by one point.

Q: Did you take it in Madison, Wisconsin?

HELBLE: I took it in Madison. I put another year of education into my program and in my senior year I took the written examination again and was successful. I took my oral exam in Chicago in the spring of 1956. I passed it and was accepted into the Foreign Service in August, 1956.

Q: Do you remember anything about the Foreign Service written exam? Was it still the three- day exam or had it been reduced to one day by then?

HELBLE: It was a one-day exam at that point. I do not recall a great deal about that exam, except that there were areas in which I had very little knowledge to share in answering the questions. I don't really recall many of the specific questions. I recall a little bit about my oral exam, which was conducted by a panel of three.

Q: Who was the chairman of it—do you remember?

HELBLE: No, I do not remember. It was a panel of three people from the State Department. There were several other candidates being examined that day. In fact, I believe that there were three candidates, one of whom had a Ph. D. I had not yet received

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my Bachelor of Arts degree. One of the other candidates was doing his thesis for his Ph. D.

Q: Do you recall who it was? Did they ever serve in the Foreign Service with you?

HELBLE: No. Neither of the other two candidates was successful in passing the oral examination that day. This puzzled me a great deal, since they knew so much more about the world than I did. However, in any event and for whatever reason I was the only successful candidate of that group of three. I recall one of the questions asked. Fortunately, on the train from Madison to Chicago I read the latest issue of "Newsweek." Some question on economics was asked by one of the examiners which bore directly on an article I had read barely two hours before. So I "lucked out" on that one. I was asked why, since my father had been President of his national fraternity and had been a very devoted fraternity man, I did not join the fraternity at the University of Wisconsin. I said that I had found that the fraternities at Wisconsin were essentially "beer drinking societies." I did not drink beer and had no interest in paying for other people to drink beer, when I wasn't going to participate. So I stayed away from the fraternities.

I was immediately asked if I had some problem with alcohol. Was I against drinking? I said no, I didn't have any problem with that. I just didn't want to pay for other people's alcohol when I wasn't drinking. [Laughter] That seemed to satisfy the Oral Board, since they passed me.

I spent that summer of 1956 working in a factory.

Q: What factory was it?

HELBLE: It was a wire factory.

Q: So you began your career by "pulling wires"?

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HELBLE: No, I began in the machine shop courtyard, where there was a large stack of rusty steel I-beams. It was my job to take a wire brush and scrape those I-beams down so that they could be painted. Then I painted them. I was on that job about a week, and my knuckles were all raw and red from rubbing against the rust. Then one day the President of the company came through the courtyard. His son and I had been very close friends when we were growing up. He recognized me immediately and said, "Say, John, didn't you just graduate from the University of Wisconsin?" I said, "Yes, I did." He said, "Then what are you doing down here in the machine shop, scraping I-beams?" I said, "Well, it's where I was assigned, and I'm happy." He didn't say anything but left. An hour later I was summoned to the front office of the factory. The President of the company told me that he wanted me to work with his son, who had just graduated from Dartmouth College, on a project to remedy a problem in their production pipe line, assess what the causes were, and come up with a recommendation.

His son was something of a ne'er-do-well. He had been raised in a very wealthy family and did not regard summer employment in his father's factory as the way to spend his time. He was enjoying the brand-new Jaguar which his grandmother had given him for graduation and rarely appeared on the job.

Since the requirement of this job was to address all three shifts at the factory, I would generally work two shifts, monitoring the situation, observing, and asking questions and so on. So it was a fairly lucrative summer for me. I learned quite a bit about the project I was doing and, in fact, was able to develop a proposed solution to the problem, subject to engineering constraints, should they arise, and which could resolve the slowdown in that particular part of the production process.

Q: That was a really worthwhile summer that you spent. Then when did you go down to Washington?

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HELBLE: I left for Washington at the end of August, 1956, and reported for duty at the Department of State on August 29.

Q: Were you assigned to the FSI, the Foreign Service Institute?

HELBLE: I started at the Foreign Service Institute in the old building where the new State Department building now stands.

Q: That was on C St. I remember it. I started into the Foreign Service at the same place. Do you remember anything about the course? What did it consist of?

HELBLE: I remember that it consisted of lectures by a number of speakers who talked about things I knew nothing about. Some of them were very interesting. I remember one, Edward Wright, who was a well-known NEA [Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs] specialist. He gave a fascinating lecture.

I was very interested in my colleagues. We were in a class of 42 officers, including five women. They included people like myself—I was 22 years old at the time. One officer was 21 and had not yet received his bachelor's degree. The average age of the class was just over 25. There were a couple of officers who were 29, one of whom was Jack Matlock, who subsequently became the U. S. Ambassador to Moscow in the 1980's.

Q: Yes, I've seen him on TV. Were there any Blacks or Hispanics in the class?

HELBLE: No Blacks and no Hispanics, but there were five women. I should say that, within three years, three of the women had married colleagues in the class...

Q: And, of course, under the rules at the time, they were required to resign.

HELBLE: That's right.

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Q: Did you run into any of your colleagues from the class at the FSI in subsequent assignments?

HELBLE: One of my classmates was Dick Moose, who resigned from the Foreign Service after having been detailed to a Congressional assignment in the 1960's. Then he joined Senator Fulbright's Senate Foreign Relations Committee staff. I dealt with him in that context in the mid 1970's, about 1973 to 1975, during an assignment to the Bureau of East Asian Affairs. I have subsequently seen Dick on occasion. During the Carter administration he first was appointed Assistant Secretary for African Affairs and then Under Secretary for Management. Under the Clinton administration he returned to the Department as Under Secretary for Management once again.

In my current job, as a "rehired annuitant" at the State Department, I've had occasion to convey my concerns about "our type of employee" to Mr. Moose. It seemed to serve some useful purpose.

Q: When you mentioned "our type of employee," what did you mean by that?

HELBLE: "Rehired annuitant" employees.

Q: What is the principal problem as you see it?

HELBLE: Well, we could go into that later on. I wouldn't want to get too much out of sequence here. I might simply say that I never directly served with any of the other members of my FSI class. There are four or five of them who are working with me in this "rehired annuitant" context, so I do see a fair amount of them.

Q: All right. The class at the Foreign Service Institute lasted about three months?

HELBLE: It was a six-week "general course." Then for those going overseas there was a follow-on, six-week Consular Course. At the end of the first six weeks I received my

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assignment to the Embassy in Seoul, Korea, and was told to take the Consular Course. It was not entirely clear in what capacity I would be working in Seoul. I then took the Consular Course. During that time the young woman whom I had been squiring for a number of years, who had been my next-door neighbor in Appleton, Wisconsin, and who preceded me by a year at the University of Wisconsin, decided that she was ready to marry me. On very short notice, because of my impending departure for Korea, we decided to get married.

Q: This wasn't "Women's Lib," but she decided to marry you?

HELBLE: It was not entirely a matter of my independent judgment, since she had advised me over the telephone that, if I went to Korea for two years, I should not necessarily expect her to be waiting for me a couple of years later. So that rather forced the issue, but I have no complaints.

Q: You've done very well, I think.

HELBLE: In any event, we were married over Thanksgiving weekend in Madison, Wisconsin. She returned to Washington with me. We drove back and set up our household.

Q: This was in what year?

HELBLE: This was in November, 1956. On the Monday after Thanksgiving, immediately following my return to Washington, I reported to my Personnel Officer that I had just gotten married over the weekend and inquired whether there was a U. S. Military Hospital in Seoul or possibly in Japan where my wife, who was a physical therapist, could get a job.

The Personnel Officer was flabbergasted at the news that I had just gotten married. With the most accusatory tone in her voice she looked at me and said, "You have done the one thing that you could do to get out of an assignment to Seoul." I said, "But I was happy

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about an assignment to Seoul. I like the idea. I'm interested in the Far East." She said, "You know perfectly well that, with the exception of the Ambassador and the Deputy Chief of Mission, there is no married housing in Seoul, and we only send bachelors there." Of course, I did not know that, but in any event my assignment to Seoul was instantly "broken." Within a day or two my Personnel Officer advised me that I was to report to the Passport Office...

Q: I take it that the Personnel Officer was a woman.

HELBLE: Yes.

Q: Do you remember her name?

HELBLE: No. She was a kindly, little, old "lady in tennis shoes." [Laughter] She was certainly not very sympathetic to my plight. In fact, she even said, after "breaking the assignment" to Seoul, "Well, we'll fix you." I didn't know what that meant until a day or two later when I was informed that I was going to the Passport Office for a short-term assignment of six or seven months as a Passport Adjudicator. I said, "Fine." What else could I expect? I had no tenure in the Department and no rights. Whatever they sent me to do was what I was going to do.

Q: What did a Passport Adjudicator do?

HELBLE: We reviewed passport applications. There was a two-tiered passport review system. I was a junior adjudicator at the GS-9 [Civil Service] level, although I was an FSO-8. I had entered the Foreign Service after July 1, 1956, which was the effective date for the change in the Foreign Service Officer system from six to eight classes. So I started as an FSO-8, even though several people in my class at the FSI were given FSO-7 appointments, based on their educational level and age group. I had no complaints about that because I was just starting into the State Department, and it was only appropriate for me to start at the bottom.

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Q: That's a good attitude. The Passport Adjudicator job was in Washington?

HELBLE: In Washington on H St., N. W.

Q: Was it at 1825 H St.?

HELBLE: That's correct.

Q: I know the place.

HELBLE: There were three other junior Foreign Service Officers who were similarly assigned. All of them were variously disgruntled. I suppose that I was the only one who more or less thought that this was just what I had to do at this point. It was, of course, tedious work, and there was, in effect, a "quota" arrangement. We were expected to "produce" 175 passport application reviews per day.

Q: When you say "review," what did this involve?

HELBLE: We reviewed them to ensure that they had been properly filled out, that any security checks were included in the file, that the proper, "raised seal" was on the attached birth certificate, that the photographs were correct, and that the citizenship requirements were met. If the applicant had been born overseas, such applications, unless accompanied by a previously issued U. S. passport, were turned over to a more experienced adjudicator.

I learned a lot during that assignment but, most importantly, during the seven months that I worked there I had a very, very capable and attractive, older, Southern woman from Lynchburg, VA, as my supervisor. Her name was Sarah Rucker. She managed the office, which was split into four, alphabetical categories. As I recall them, they covered A through F, G through K, M through R, and S through Z, the category where I worked. The divisions were based on the beginning letter of the last names of the applicants.

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Q: They figured that this was numerically...

HELBLE: It was proportionately divided in terms of all of the applications. Each office was identically staffed. It became evident as the "passport season" came upon us, starting in February, when Americans tend to file applications for passports for summer travel in huge numbers, that our particular division was the only one keeping abreast of the "flow." Indeed, by April or May, we were taking a portion of the applications which had originally been directed to other divisions, because they were not keeping up with the "flow."

It was my view, which I profoundly believed, that the only difference between divisions, since all of the staffing was the same, was the manager. Our manager, a sweet, Southern lady, whose accent I could barely understand during my first several months in that office, since I had had no exposure to the Southern accent, was very gracious with "her" employees. If an employee, even during the peak of the season, needed to take a few days off, for whatever reason, no question was raised about it. This approach did not apply to the "managers" of the other three divisions, all of whom said, "You will work until the season is over." Morale in our office was very good, and morale in the other, three divisions was very poor. I saw a direct correlation between that management technique and productivity.

Q: That's a good point.

HELBLE: It was a very helpful lesson in other...

Q: You've used this technique since then?

HELBLE: In other places in the Foreign Service.

Q: Well, John, in 1956 or thereabouts this was a time when the "McCarthy Era" was more or less over, but there were still some hangovers from it. This had been...

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HELBLE: You'd better believe that there were hangovers.

Q: Were there problems about communists or alleged communists?

HELBLE: My first problem came up the day I entered on duty in the Foreign Service. Naturally, everybody says, "Where are you from?" I would say, "I'm from Wisconsin." They would say, "Where in Wisconsin?" I would say, "Appleton." Well, Senator Joe McCarthy was from Appleton. McCarthy had gone to my father's high school, when my father was the Principal. My father knew Senator McCarthy very well. Joe McCarthy's niece was in each of my high school classes. Well, I found out, within a matter of days or even hours, that I had to stop saying that I was from Appleton, Wisconsin, because people in the Foreign Service and in the State Department regarded this association with McCarthy as a "red flag" which immediately provoked outrage and so forth. I would have endless discussions if I allowed this to continue.

Q: So you learned to "fudge" where you came from?

HELBLE: After my first several days in the State Department, as far as other people were concerned, I gave up saying that I was from Wisconsin. I would say, "I'm from the Mid West." People would ask, "Well, what part of the Mid West?" I would say, "The upper Mid West," and usually we would move the conversation to other matters.

Q: Good diplomatic training.

HELBLE: We had a "watch" on for people applying...

Q: Was there a "Lookout List"?

HELBLE: There was. There were numerous card files. All of these had to be checked manually. We didn't have computers to do it in those days. There were FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigations] lists, and there was a great deal of focus on the "communist"

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aspect in terms of passport applications. Ms Frances Knight, who was the Director of the office Passport Division, was very much a Joe McCarthy...

Q: Supporter. At least she sympathized with him. Did you ever meet her?

HELBLE: I believe that I met her once in her office, but I have no memory of her as a person.

In any event, I did that job for seven months. I was able to exceed the review "quota" but didn't think much about it until about a year later, when I received a \$50 "commendation award" at my next post. The \$50 award was very welcome. This was the most lucrative award I received for the next 28 years.

Q: Then you completed your time as a Passport Adjudicator. Were you asked to express a preference for your next post? Were they still filling out "April Fool" forms at that time?

HELBLE: Well, if they were, I don't remember. I think that I filled one out in connection with my initial entry into the FSI in the fall of 1956. I don't recall doing that after then.

In any event, I was on "language probation." I had studied Spanish in high school and spent two years studying Spanish in college at the University of Wisconsin but like so many Americans at that point I did not have any oral facility in speaking Spanish. So I had to get off language probation. They assigned me to the Foreign Service Institute again for three months of intensive Spanish instruction. I did well enough so that the language probation was lifted.

Q: Did that lead directly to your assignment to a Latin American post?

HELBLE: At some point during that language training I was assigned as a Vice Consul at the Consulate in Puerto La Cruz, Venezuela. I should say, to interject a personal note

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at this point, that just before I entered Spanish language training at the FSI our first son, Stuart, was born. So I now had an expanded family responsibility.

In any event we went to Puerto La Cruz. There is no longer a U. S. Consulate there. The Consulate was closed down in the early 1960's. During my time there it serviced the very substantial American community—largely the oil industry and, to some extent, the iron ore mining industry, as well as related American business activity in the Eastern oil fields of Venezuela.

Q: Puerto La Cruz is North of the Orinoco River?

HELBLE: It is. The Orinoco River split the consular district. Puerto La Cruz is North of the Orinoco.

Q: If I may raise a point here. You mentioned going to Puerto La Cruz with your wife and son. I've had the privilege of knowing her for many years now. I know that she is partly of Philippine ancestry and so on. Was she born in the Philippines?

HELBLE: She was born in the Philippines of an American mother, who was a nurse. Her father, who was a Filipino, met her mother when he was doing his internship after medical school. He had studied medicine at the University of Minnesota. He was doing his internship at a small town called Oshkosh, Wisconsin, where he met Joan's mother. That was in 1932, I believe. I have to say that we only learned several years ago that Joan's father and mother had “eloped” because the parents of Joan's mother did not take kindly to the thought of their daughter marrying a Filipino.

Q: When you say “eloped,” does this mean that it was without benefit of clergy?

HELBLE: They were married in the church but not in sight of or with the knowledge of her family.

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Q: That was a common attitude at that time.

HELBLE: Yes. One of her older brothers was aware of the impending elopement.

Q: To go back to Joan, what did she think about it when you told her that you were assigned to Puerto La Cruz, Venezuela?

HELBLE: She had no problem whatsoever with it. When she married me, she had been accepted at Medical School at the University of Wisconsin. When she had finished her pre-med study...

Q: She intended to be a doctor?

HELBLE: She was going to be a doctor. She had been accepted by the University of Wisconsin Medical School. This was rather unusual in those days because not many women applicants were accepted. It was at that time that she fell in love with me. I intended to go into the Foreign Service, even though I had not yet been accepted.

Q: Did you tell her, "If you marry me, you'll go far?" [Laughter]

HELBLE: Well, like women in those days, she took the view that the husband's career was first and foremost. Basically, she continued to hold this view over the years, though she got a little "restless" by the late 1970's or 1980's and wanted to do some work on her own. Not enough that there was any "aggravation" in the family, but I was aware of her feelings.

Q: I know that Spanish has fairly well died out in the Philippines, with only a few exceptions. Did Joan speak any Spanish at all?

HELBLE: No, she did not. She was born on July 4, 1933, curiously enough.

Q: Was she born in Luzon?

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HELBLER: Yes, near Baguio in the town of Mangaldan, in Pangasinan Province. She lived with her parents outside of Baguio at an American gold mining camp approximately an hour's drive northwest of Baguio in the mountains of Northern Luzon. Her father was the doctor at the gold mining camp, and her mother was the nurse. Joan was an only child.

In 1941 she was going to school in Baguio. She would spend the weekdays in Baguio attending a Catholic school. On Friday afternoons she would go home to the gold mining camp for the weekend. She was at the school when the Japanese attacked the Philippines [December 8, 1941]. Japanese bombers flew over the city of Baguio and dropped some bombs. Her parents dashed to Baguio, picked her up, and returned to the gold mining camp.

When the Japanese forces landed in Luzon, Joan and her parents and about 60 other Americans and Filipinos recognized that if they stayed at the gold mining camp, they would soon be captured. So they started what became a one-year "trek" deeper into the mountains of Northern Luzon, moving away from the Japanese. During this time there were, of course, some American and Filipino guerrilla groups operating in the area, and Joan's father assisted those units, particularly in his capacity as a doctor—although he stayed with the basic group from the gold mining camp with whom he had fled.

About 11 months later in November, 1942, they ran out of area to retreat to, after having narrowly escaped Japanese patrols on a number of occasions. However, one morning a Japanese patrol came upon the group's camp and assaulted it. The group did not resist them, but the Japanese assaulted the camp anyway. There were no American guerrilla units nearby to assist in defending them. During the shooting Joan's mother was shot in the stomach but not killed. Shortly thereafter, she was brutally murdered by the Japanese troops. Joan's father was accused by the Japanese of having probably worked with the guerrillas. He was subjected to the "water torture" but refused to divulge anything. He and Joan were subsequently held in a Japanese concentration camp in the area.

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However, before that happened, the Japanese sorted their “victims” whom they had just captured at the camp. They lined up most of the people from the gold mining camp. The Japanese were about to kill them with machine gun fire. Joan was standing there in the lineup.

Q: How old would she have been at this time?

HELBLE: This was late 1942, so she was almost nine and a half years old. A young Japanese lieutenant came along and saw her standing there in the group about to be shot. He stopped the firing squad and went over and took her out of the group. After she was removed from this group, the Japanese proceeded to shoot the rest of them. It was later learned—somehow, though I don't know how—that the Japanese lieutenant had a young daughter in Tokyo, approximately Joan's age.

Q: So this moved him.

HELBLE: It moved him, yes.

Q: I know that this must be a painful thing to go into and I don't want to press you at all, but it is interesting to learn the background, not only of Foreign Service Officers, but of their wives. Wives are so much a part of the career of a Foreign Service Officer. A great deal of what they did and what their cultural or historical experiences were tends to be lost. This is one of the opportunities to record them. You may not have thought about this for a long time, I suspect.

HELBLE: No, I've thought a lot about it.

Q: Yes.

HELBLE: I think that you're absolutely right about the background of wives and how this bears on your career. In Joan's case, after six months in the concentration camp, she

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and her father were released to go back and live in their home village of Mangaldan, near Lingayen Gulf. Her father and uncle built a radio for themselves which became part of the network between the remaining guerrillas in the mountains and American submarines which were operating from offshore and resupplying the guerrillas, to the extent that they could. So he was once again exposing himself significantly to risk.

Meanwhile, Joan took up the life of a village child and attended school, to the extent that it was much of a school. She had some “bad” experiences in that context. However, she also did most of the market shopping for the family. To do so, she had of course learned the Pangasinan dialect. She never learned to speak Tagalog [the major, regional language in Luzon]. Pangasinan was the dialect of the area that Joan and her father lived in.

Just to complete coverage of that experience for Joan, she spent the years of the World War II occupation of the Philippines under conditions of considerable privation, needless to say, and considerable, emotional trauma. She had an excellent father who did everything that he could to bring her up. When the American troops under MacArthur landed at Lingayen Gulf in December, 1944, to liberate Luzon, Joan's father was given several hours' notice on the radio to remove all of the villagers in Mangaldan and the immediate area along the beach because a very heavy, artillery bombardment was about to commence. He alerted everybody and a large group of them fled into the interior of Luzon, fearful that they were going to run into Japanese units. They had some trouble but were able to get about 20 miles inland. The bombardment started, and the invasion and liberation came. Within a day or so American troops had advanced to where Joan, her father, and the villagers were, and they were liberated.

At this point her father became the good friend of an American captain. Ultimately, the captain arranged for Joan and her father to board an empty troop ship in the spring of 1945 and to go to the United States. Neither of them had American citizenship. Joan was born of an American mother during a specific time frame that lasted for about 15 months during 1933 and 1934. American law did not allow an American woman to transmit

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citizenship to her child during that time. Ultimately, the citizenship issue was resolved in 1951 or 1952. A special act of Congress, a “private bill,” was introduced by no one less than Senator Joe McCarthy to remedy this situation.

So Joan came to the United States in 1945. Her father had nothing in the way of resources. He had his medical education but he had to get his U. S. license to practice medicine, although he had been U. S. trained. He did his internship at a hospital in Chicago. He had no means to support Joan, so she went to live with her maternal grandmother, who was my next door neighbor in Appleton, Wisconsin.

To return to the point you made, and rightly so, I think that this kind of background demonstrates the influence of one's background in preparing a man or woman for a Foreign Service career. Joan had been through an awful lot. There wasn't much in our subsequent years, in all of the “hardship” posts that we served in, some of which were very dangerous, that she couldn't handle and didn't handle well. I'm sure that that background had a lot to do with it.

Q: This is very helpful and quite interesting because the Filipino guerrilla saga is an enormous one. The Filipinos deserve tremendous credit for remaining faithful to an “Uncle Sam” who had largely abandoned them, in fact, in 1942 for reasons that they could not understand.

HELBLE: If I could add a postscript, Doctor Biason, Joan's father, received the Medal of Freedom from the United States, several years after World War II, for his service with the guerrillas. It was that which led to the private act of Congress conferring U. S. citizenship on him. He has been written about quite extensively in a number of the books on the guerrilla operations in Northern Luzon. He was a most impressive man who did, indeed, serve his country extremely well, whether his country is defined as the Philippines or the United States.

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Q: Did he ever become an American citizen?

HELBLE: He did.

Q: He finally died in the United States?

HELBLE: Yes, he died in 1973, working as a rural doctor, which he did from the time he received his U. S. license to practice medicine.

Q: Well, John, if we could return to Puerto La Cruz, could you give me some idea of what you were doing at this, your first post in the Foreign Service, after your first experience in the U. S. as a Passport Adjudicator?

HELBLE: There were four Americans at the Consulate. There was an American secretary, a Consul and Principal Officer, and two Vice Consuls. Obviously, I was the junior Vice Consul. The Consul when I arrived in Puerto La Cruz was Ed Garwood, who had transferred from the Foreign Service Staff corps and was an FSO-6. I was still an FSO-8 at that point.

Q: He was one of the "lateral entry" FSO's?

HELBLE: That's correct. The other Vice Consul, who was senior to me, was Robert S. Dillon, whom I certainly remember. Bob went on to have a very successful Foreign Service career in subsequent years as Ambassador to Lebanon, among other assignments. I was impressed with Bob because he had served with the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] in the early 1950's...

Q: I didn't realize that.

HELBLE: He served on Quemoy [or Kinmen] Island, just off the coast of mainland China, carrying on activities which were little known for many, many years. American CIA

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personnel led Chinese Nationalist troops onto the China mainland on “sabotage” missions during the Korean War.

Q: Were these “one on one” operations?

HELBLE: He was posted on Kinmen at least a year, if not longer. That sounded like fairly exciting “stuff” to me, who came from a modest, quiet background...

Q: To say nothing of the danger.

HELBLE: In upstate Wisconsin. In any event, Bob was a wonderful fellow, a very effective officer, and a very good friend—a friendship which has endured for many, many years.

I remember that Bob incurred the displeasure of Consul Ed Garwood. The Consul had a very “Germanic” style of operating, possibly because he was married to a German woman. However, she did not exhibit the same traits but was a very lovely person. Garwood was “dictatorial” and insecure, which is, perhaps, a redundant way of describing him. He considered Bob “insolent,” “arrogant,” and an “upstart.” None of these terms really applied, but that was Garwood's perception. He was always very critical of Bob, who was still quite young, of course. Bob and his wife had three children. Garwood did not have any children when Bob arrived in Puerto La Cruz, although Garwood and his wife had a baby about a year later. Garwood once accused Bob, and quite seriously, of “having three strikes against him” already and that “he ought to get out of the Foreign Service.” [Laughter] This somewhat demonstrates Garwood's mentality.

Q: Had Garwood had previous consular assignments, other than Puerto La Cruz?

HELBLE: No, this was his first assignment as an officer that I recall. Garwood had previously served in the communications and diplomatic pouch section in the U. S. Mission in Berlin.

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Q: Did Garwood work for the State Department in Berlin?

HELBLE: Yes. He was 42 years old when I arrived in Puerto La Cruz and was an FSO-6. He took his grade quite seriously, since there was nobody of that grade in the immediate vicinity.

Q: How far was Puerto La Cruz from the Embassy in Caracas?

HELBLE: I can't put it in miles, but it took more than an hour by air. It is about 150 miles due East of Caracas. It was about a five to six hour drive over some pretty rough roads.

Q: Did you have much contact with the Embassy?

HELBLE: No.

Q: Did Embassy officers ever come down and see you people in the Consulate in Puerto La Cruz?

HELBLE: I believe that somebody from the Embassy once turned up at the Consulate. In fact, a fellow with whom I work today, Sam Moskowitz, who was Second Secretary in the Political Section, came down for a day. However, they usually came on the morning flight and went back to Caracas on the afternoon flight. That was the extent of the visit.

Q: Did Consul Garwood have much to do with the Embassy? Did they call him in for meetings or anything like that?

HELBLE: No. There was none of that. I don't recall any of us ever having been asked to come to Caracas. As I say, visits by Embassy officers were perfunctory. Apparently, the Ambassador, whose name I forget and who had been assigned to Caracas before I arrived, had made a visit to Puerto La Cruz at some point, but we never saw him again. The only "outsiders" I ever saw from the State Department that I recall, with the exception

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of a couple of very brief visits by Embassy officers, were the Foreign Service Inspectors who came to Puerto La Cruz.

Q: So you were inspected once?

HELBLE: Yes. That was my first exposure to Foreign Service inspectors.

Q: We can go into this in a minute, but I wondered whether you had a classified courier pouch service.

HELBLE: We did have a classified courier pouch service. I cannot recall the frequency but I believe that it was once a month. We simply met the courier at the airplane and exchanged pouches. Then he reboarded the plane and returned to Caracas.

Q: He spent minimum time in Puerto La Cruz. Now, about the Foreign Service inspectors, perhaps you could go into that and then describe some of the things that you did.

HELBLE: I really don't recall much about this Foreign Service inspection that occurred. Nothing dramatic came out of it. I don't recall who the inspectors were, but it was a "civil" encounter from my point of view. Unlike many inspections, I had no bitter tastes afterwards.

Q: It did no harm. What did you do at the Consulate, as a regular thing?

HELBLE: First of all, I was assigned to handle non-immigrant visas, which were regarded as the most "harmless" thing that you could assign somebody to do. Soon afterwards, I acquired responsibility for handling the much smaller but still significant number of immigrant visas. I had had the FSI Consular Course, but that, of course, did not give me much background for what I had to learn. I was able to rely on Bob Dillon the other Vice Consul extensively for counseling and advice. Consul Garwood was very "anti-foreign" and regarded every foreigner who walked into the office as trying to get illegally into the United States. He was not exactly an inspiration for me in performing the job the way

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the Department intended. I had to learn that job over a period of time. Bob Dillon was much more level-headed and very helpful. He got me through the early stages of that educational process.

I had some interesting experiences. There was an American citizen who had married a Frenchwoman. He was working in the oil fields of Eastern Venezuela. He had not yet taken her to the United States. He wanted an immigrant visa for her. When a “negative” police report, or, perhaps, I should say a “positive” police report came back from the French police, it indicated that she had been arrested since she had been what was known in the post-war years as a prostitute, but they used more delicate terminology. I've forgotten the term...

Q: I think that the French term is “proxenetisme.” Proxenetism is a word in the English dictionary which you run across once in a while. It may have been that.

HELBLE: No, now that I recall it, she had been required to have a health certificate, which prostitutes had to have.

Q: She “flunked” the exam, did she?

HELBLE: No. What I mean is that when she was in Paris after the war, under the law she was required to carry a health certificate with her, issued by the French authorities, which supposedly verified that she was “clean” for the utilization of her body for pecuniary reasons. Any woman who had a record of having been issued a health certificate was presumed to have been a prostitute.

So there was a terrible uproar as far as the husband was concerned.

Q: Did he know about this?

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HELBLE: He learned about it after I mentioned it to her in an interview in the Consulate. I said that this would preclude her from entering the United States under the law. This, of course, was something that I had checked out with Bob Dillon before the interview.

The husband came into the office and was absolutely outraged. I had a terrible scene on my hands, but I carefully applied the law. The truth of the matter is that I do not recall how the case finally worked out. However, I very clearly recall the husband saying, "You should understand that my uncle is Senator Johnston from Louisiana." Well, I was a young, naive officer, and that made no impression on me. [Laughter] However, neither my superiors nor I ever heard from Senator Johnston. The last thing I can recall of the case was when the woman was denied an immigrant visa. That was in that day and age. Things like that probably are handled quite differently now.

Q: Well, the simple reality is that Congress had passed laws, over the years, setting out certain categories of people who are inadmissible to the United States. Prostitutes are among them. Whether this was a reasonable exercise of legislative authority is another matter. You had no alternative to applying the law and the regulations. You may have felt that this was pretty "tough" on somebody. I've had experiences of that kind over the years. There's nothing much that you can do.

HELBLE: You've sworn to uphold the law. Of course, we had a fair amount of welfare and whereabouts cases.

Q: Were there many Americans living in the consular district?

HELBLE: There were 5500 Americans living in the consular district. Most of them worked in the oil industry. A high percentage of them were from Texas and Oklahoma—many of them "roustabouts" and drillers of various categories. They were a renowned, "rough and ready" crowd, to say the least. So there were problems throughout the consular

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district. There were routine passport and notarial services to perform because of that large, American community.

We certainly had a number of instances where Americans got into difficulties with the local authorities, trouble over women, and so forth. One of the more interesting aspects of performing these services was that the oil companies, and eventually the iron ore companies, decided that it was far too expensive to give their employees time off to go to Puerto La Cruz and obtain a renewal of their passports or to have notarial services performed. These employees had to do this for reasons related to their own personal circumstances. The iron ore mining companies were subsidiaries of U. S. Steel and Bethlehem Steel, both of which had large mining operations South of the Orinoco River. For the employees of either the oil or the iron ore companies going to the Consulate involved an overnight stay in Puerto La Cruz and two days' travel time to go from central Venezuela up to Puerto La Cruz, an oil port servicing the eastern oil fields. So it was arranged that the Vice Consul from Puerto La Cruz would fairly regularly—about once every three months—would travel to interior Venezuela, stay at the oil or iron ore company camp, provide passport and notarial services...

Q: And reports of birth.

HELBLE: Reports of birth. As the junior Vice Consul, I would have thought that others would have enjoyed the experience of going to the camps. I certainly did. It was strenuous, to a degree.

Q: How did you travel to these places?

HELBLE: I would take a Consulate jeep, drive down, and spend the night at stop no. 1—maybe 100 or 125 miles South of Puerto La Cruz. After I finished work there, I would go along to another camp and set up shop there.

Q: How long did one of these trips take?

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HELBLE: They were usually about five day trips. I'd probably stay at three different camps, including the long haul down from Ciudad Bolivar, down the Orinoco River a ways and then across it by ferry. Sometimes, I would fly from Ciudad Bolivar down to some of the camps, but most of the time I drove.

Q: Did you use an oil company plane? How did you travel by air?

HELBLE: No, I would make the trip according to the airline schedule. There was a flight every few days to a dirt landing strip near one or two of the iron ore operations.

Q: They knew you were coming and would meet you?

HELBLE: It was all arranged. They treated me very well.

Q: Was there a good telephone service?

HELBLE: No, it was very poor. I made the arrangements more by mail than by telephone. So I got to see some of the wilderness of the northern Amazon area in the process. I traveled by boat, in some cases, for short distances—an hour or so in a boat provided by the iron ore camp, for example. It was very impressive to see an industrial operation of the magnitude that they were undertaking there. A huge mountain of iron ore was literally being carved off from the top, using the classic, circular pattern of roads around the mountain.

Q: Open strip mining?

HELBLE: Yes. So it was a good education, and I met some interesting people. What I also found was that, whether in the oil or the iron ore camps, the Americans working there really had a deadly social environment, which was all rank-oriented. In my official position I had access to the highest levels of the camp, both socially as well as in terms of business. Socially, I would be entertained at the highest levels. I could see that, in effect, the wife of

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the CEO [Chief Executive Officer] clearly preceded the chief financial officer's wife, who also clearly dominated the next wife down the line.

Q: So this prepared you for Foreign Service realities.

HELBLE: Yes. Well, as a matter of fact, even in the Puerto La Cruz context, I understood something about rank, given the nature of my supervisory officer. However, we at least did not live in a tight, little compound as they did in that situation in the camps, which were completely isolated from other influences and contacts.

Q: Did you live in the town of Puerto La Cruz, did you live under special circumstances—where did you live?

HELBLE: My family and I lived in Puerto La Cruz in a small, oil company compound of six houses, owned by Phillips Petroleum, only one of which was occupied by a Phillips employee. He was the manager of the compound and of Phillips operations there. Phillips did not have any exploration or significant marketing operations in Puerto La Cruz. The other houses were occupied by the manager of the local Goodyear establishment and the manager of the Sears, Roebuck store, which opened shortly before we got there and signified a great advance in terms of goods available. A Texaco employee and The Royal Bank of Canada manager also resided in the Philip's compound.

Q: What was the population of Puerto La Cruz then?

HELBLE: I forget the exact population but I believe that it was in the neighborhood of 40 or 50 thousand.

Q: A substantial town.

HELBLE: Yes, it was.

Q: I suppose that the whole consular district had a population of several million people.

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HELBLE: I really can't say. I don't recall. As an American consular officer, I was focused on the 5500 American citizens, first and foremost.

Q: And you dealt with some Venezuelans who wanted to go to the U. S.?

HELBLE: Yes, as well as many "displaced persons" out of the refugee camps in Europe, including Italians, Hungarians, and so on who, after World War II, were relocated or had chosen to relocate in eastern Venezuela. So there was a subgroup, many of whom wanted ultimately to go to the United States.

Q: So you did citizenship and visa work mainly?

HELBLE: That was in the early days. Then, after a while, I got to know people in Puerto La Cruz who were high in the oil industry. I played "stag bridge" both with them and with other American businessmen. This opened up social opportunities and expanded my horizons in terms of sources of information. I became aware of labor difficulties with Venezuelan workers in the oil industry and growing communist influence, as these American businessmen perceived it, among the trade unions.

We arrived in Puerto La Cruz in October, 1957. You may recall that it was not too long after that time that Castro took over in Cuba.

Q: He took over in Cuba in January, 1959.

HELBLE: This created a major problem when Castro seized power in 1959. Some of the labor strife was related to the Castro takeover in Cuba. These developments reverberated in eastern Venezuela.

In some of these social contacts with refinery personnel and other oil executives I became aware of the labor agitation and problems that the company management was having with trade unions. There was a feeling that there was communist penetration developing.

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Q: Did you have any reporting responsibilities?

HELBLE: I had no reporting responsibilities at that time. However, after one particularly interesting discussion with these businessmen I reported it to the Consul. At that point I believe that Garwood had left. The other Vice Consul, Frederick E. Myers, who had replaced Bob Dillon in the summer of 1958, was also a "lateral entrant" from the Foreign Service Staff corps. He became, if you will, "charg#" at the Consulate, when Garwood left and prior to the arrival of Garwood's replacement, who did not turn up for five months. So this left "Fritz" Myers and myself at the Consulate. I asked Myers whether it would be useful if I wrote up the essence of this conversation. He said, "Well, that's up to you. That's not what we're here for, but if you want to waste your time, go ahead."

I found the subject matter interesting, so I wrote an airgram which went at least to the Embassy in Caracas, if not to the Department in Washington. I don't recall that. However, there was some expression of interest in the subject from the Embassy in Caracas after my report was received. From that time on I started to write reports of a labor and political nature. The two were obviously intertwined. I did some economic reporting. There was a required economic report, as I recall. Fritz Myers had no interest whatsoever in doing it. So, responding to a vacuum, I reported on political and labor events and economic issues, as my time permitted, as events dictated, and as information was available. I actually started to call on executives at their offices and talk about these matters.

Q: So you developed the information this way.

HELBLE: I developed the information.

Q: Was there a positive response from the Embassy?

HELBLE: I certainly had a positive response to that first report but I don't recall if I had any more praise or recognition from the Embassy. However, I was learning something about writing reports, though I certainly had no "teacher" at hand and nobody who was locally

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interested in it. It was fascinating material for me to deal with, which I handled in any spare time I had. That gave me the first opportunity I had in the Foreign Service to get into the things in the Foreign Service that I was interested in—increasingly, as the years went on.

Q: Did you have any administrative responsibilities?

HELBLE: We had a very small operation. Eventually, the American secretary left, and we hired a Hungarian refugee who was very good and very professional to replace her. From the outset I had been the person whose job description should have read, “Whatever needs to be done.” In a small Consulate, with a couple of local employees, and the only other Americans present were senior to me, that gave me the opportunity to deal with a variety of opportunities.

Generally speaking, our driver was also the janitor. He usually swept the Consulate floors each morning. However, he required leave—sick leave and vacation, from time to time. So his job of sweeping out the Consulate was generously given to me. I didn't see anything wrong with that. The floors needed sweeping. I recall that we had a “stock room” where we also kept the Consulate files. The place had become a mess. One day I decided that I should really straighten it up so that we could find things and make room for new supplies and so forth. I worked several hours one afternoon doing this.

However, before I did that, I cleaned up a “secure vault” in the back of the office where we stored classified material and any other, “precious” commodities, whatever they might have been. There was a medicine cabinet in that little, confined space which, I had noted, had all sorts of “outdated” items in it. The cabinet was in a state of total disarray. I thought that this really should be cleaned up. So one day, when things were “slow” in the outer office, I went in there. The medicine cabinet was perched on top of a four-drawer, steel, combination lock safe. Really, the only way to get at it was to stand up on the safe, squat down with the door of the medicine cabinet open, and go through it, shelf by shelf.

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I proceeded to do this and was squatting down there for about two hours. I took out and set aside things that I was going to save. I had a waste basket below that I would drop things into that I wasn't going to save, and so on. I accomplished the task of arranging a tidy and up to date medicine cabinet. On the bottom shelf of the medicine cabinet was a glass bottle of tincture of merthiolate, an antiseptic. I thought, "Well, that's a good bottle. We'll keep that."

So I attempted to stand up on top of the safe to lower myself to the floor. The door of the medicine cabinet was open, because I couldn't close it while I was standing in front of it. As I got up, having been squatting for two hours, I lost my balance and fell backwards. To save myself from falling flat on my back, I grabbed at the medical supply cabinet which, of course, was loose and was resting on top of the safe. As I fell backward, holding onto the medicine cabinet, the cabinet fell forward while I fell backward. I landed on the floor and was all right. The medicine cabinet came down and everything tumbled out. Most seriously, the bottle of merthiolate broke on top of the steel cabinet and drained its contents through the four drawers of the file safe. This left everything in the classified safe in...

Q: *"Condition red."*

HELBLE: Condition red. Well, it was lunchtime. I simply picked up all of the items that had fallen from the cabinet, put them in a cardboard carton, closed the safe, locked it, and went home for lunch. An hour later I came back to the Consulate and thought, "Well, I suppose I have to fix up that medicine cabinet."

But then one of our local secretaries said, "You know, John—or Mr. Helble, as they often called me—this fluorescent light above my desk has been flickering. Could you do something about that?" I said, "Well, I'll try. I don't know anything about fluorescent lights." In 1958 that was something that I hadn't much encountered. So I stood on her desk and, being relatively short at 5'6", I had a little bit of trouble reaching the fixture and

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the fluorescent tube. I jiggled the offending tube. Somehow, I lost control of the tube, and it came smashing down on the secretary's desk and broke, fortunately avoiding her. There were all kinds of broken glass on her desk which I knew could be hazardous to your health. You could cut yourself. So I swept up that mess and replaced the fluorescent tube, this time using two dictionaries on the desk to give me added height. I secured the lamp.

I then went to the supply room, which, as I mentioned before, I had left in a mess. I thought that I would take care of this. I worked throughout the shelves and straightened them up. Late in the afternoon I became annoyed that a rotating, circular electric fan on the floor was up against a door and was banging it every time it rotated at a certain point. So I went to move the fan. I reached down to move the fan. Somebody said something to me. I looked up but kept reaching down, putting my fingers into the fan blades. I hurt my fingers enough so that I had to go to the emergency room at the local hospital, where I had a half dozen stitches put into my fingers. I returned to the office just in time to help close up.

I went home and said to my wife, "Joan, you won't believe the day I've had." [Laughter] But this was rather representative of the types of things that a junior Vice Consul has the opportunity to do...

Q: So you did a lot of administrative work, John.

HELBLE: Exactly.

Q: Are there any other aspects of your time in Puerto La Cruz which you'd like to go into?

HELBLE: Well, a couple of things happened which, at least for a young Foreign Service Officer, were rather dramatic. I cannot recall the date precisely but I think it was in 1958. There was a very bad fire in Puerto La Cruz. One side of the Phillips Petroleum Company camp, where we lived, was adjacent to the major pipelines running from the oilfields in the interior part of Venezuela to a refinery or directly to the port, where the crude oil was loaded on tankers.

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One day there was a tremendous explosion at the refinery, which was less than a quarter of a mile from our house. Huge plumes of black smoke immediately rose into the sky. What had happened was that a 36" diameter pipeline had ruptured and the oil had ignited, affecting smaller, adjacent pipelines as well. The fire threatened to spread to the whole area, as it was in close proximity to the tank farm, as well as to the refinery itself. We were very concerned. The camp where we lived was evacuated, because it was too close to the flames for comfort. Very little of the proper firefighting equipment was available. In fact, it took several days before the fire was extinguished. This was done successfully and without igniting nearby tanks filled with oil or the other installations at the refinery.

The investigations made after the fire indicated that the fire was due to sabotage. It was presumed that in view of certain leftist influences in the petroleum industry the trade union had arranged to rupture the pipeline and set the fire. This created more concern than had previously existed among the American oil companies. It was a very worrisome development. Fortunately, there were no sequels to that sabotage incident, but it was something that remained in my memory as to how nasty this sort of political encounter could be.

Q: Did they ever find out who was responsible for the incident?

HELBLE: No, they were never able to "pin it on anybody," but on the basis of the investigation after the fire was put out, it was clear that some of the safety mechanisms had been tampered with. There was, of course, considerable concern for personal safety and for the safety of our community in the immediate area near where the fire had broken out. It was a dramatic event which has lasted in my memory.

Q: Refinery fires are very dangerous because there is very little time to react. I visited a couple of American refineries near Le Havre, France, when I was Consul there. I was told that from the time a fire breaks out, they had 45 seconds before the whole refinery would blow up. So they lived 45 seconds from disaster at all times. The guy that said this seemed

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to be remarkably relaxed about it. I thought, "Well, this is something that you live with and you think about—and you think about it all the time."

HELBLE: That's right.

The other event was the fallout from the overthrow of the military dictatorship of Perez Jimenez, who, as I recall, had ruled Venezuela for about nine years. He was overthrown in 1959. About four months after he was overthrown, an incident occurred in Puerto La Cruz on a Sunday morning which was most impressive, as far as I was concerned. I first became aware of it when I went to the Consulate early one Sunday morning to issue a "Crew List Visa" to a ship—a matter which I handled on the weekends when the Consulate was closed.

As I arrived at the Consulate, which was on the second floor of a small, shopping center, opposite a Police station, I noticed that there was a great deal of activity in the parking lot area of the shopping center. Truckloads of men armed with machetes and pieces of steel reinforcing bars seemed to be arriving in considerable numbers. The occupants were getting down from the trucks, and there was a sense of agitation prevalent amongst them. I decided that I would move my car to the area behind the building where the Consulate was located. I went up on the roof of this two story building and looked out at the scene. By this time some members of what was clearly a mob were throwing rocks at the Police station, breaking the windows, and so on. The Police station had been secured and was closed up. I could see the roof of the Police station opposite me. A number of Police with rifles were peering over the side of the building, looking at this crowd.

Somebody then "torched" one of the vehicles in the parking lot in front of the shopping mall. Eventually, all seven of the vehicles that happened to be parked there were "torched" and burned. The mob became uglier and uglier. The Police took no action, other than remaining on the roof of the Police station. The mob got something which served as a "battering ram," proceeded to knock down the door of the Police station, and entered the

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building. The Police on the roof still did nothing, but within a few minutes someone was dragged out from within the station by the mob. They beat the individual and eventually killed him. They tied a rope around him and tied the other end of the rope to a vehicle and towed his body down the street, with everybody hooting and hollering.

Q: Was this individual in uniform?

HELBLE: He was not in uniform. As it turned out, he had apparently been a member of the dreaded "Seguridad Nacional" [National Security Force] of the Perez Jimenez regime. This was an organization which was blamed for many of the excesses of the Perez Jimenez government. He was associated, therefore, with the regime then in power. He had been discovered in the town square of Puerto La Cruz on that Sunday morning in a vehicle. Somebody had recognized him. A crowd of people surrounded his vehicle. One of the onlookers jumped up on top of his car and started haranguing the crowd to attack him. The individual panicked, started the car, and "pressed the pedal to the metal." He took off through the crowd and fled to the Police station. The crowd followed him, and that was the reason for the way they behaved toward him at the Police station.

When I realized that this mob might not have finished doing all that it wanted to do, I left from the rear of the Consulate building and drove in my car to our oil company camp, which was less than three blocks away. I found the manager of the camp and explained to him what was going on. We assembled the people living in the six houses and their domestic servants. At this point the mob was, indeed, moving in our general direction. We could see and hear this mob down at the other end of the camp. We were concerned, of course, that this mob intended to enter this American oil company camp. As I mentioned in describing the previous incident, there were certainly concerns about the security of individual Americans and American installations which might turn out to be "targets" of the mob.

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However, the mob went right by our camp. We had obtained wire cutters. We had a high, chain-link fence around the camp. There would have been no way to get out of the camp except over or through that fence. The fence was high and had barbed wire on top of it. We planned to cut our way through the fence, if the mob came up the road toward us.

The mob went to the adjacent facility, which was separated from our camp by a small road. That facility was the headquarters of a large trucking and transportation firm called “Transportes Sanchez” [Sanchez Transportation Company] which specialized in hauling oil pipe back and forth, from the port to the oil fields. The mob was angry with the owner of “Transportes Sanchez” because he had allegedly prospered significantly under the Perez Jimenez regime. This seemed to be true. The mob spent the rest of the day—about eight hours—“torching” trucks and buildings. They even got into the trucks and drove them around town, drove them off hillsides, and even...

Q: Sounds as if these guys were sore about something!

HELBLE: They were a bunch of “unhappy campers.” They even rammed the trucks together. The drivers of each of two trucks would get the vehicles going on a straight street, headed toward each other. At the last moment they would jump and let the vehicles collide.

Meanwhile, less than a quarter of a mile away, was a National Guard unit in its barracks. Perhaps prudently, they didn't move from their barracks during the entire episode. The Police, of course, had already been “neutralized” by their early morning experience. We recognized that there was no security in the town and that no cavalry was going to come to the rescue and bring this foolishness to a stop. However, it was a hot, spring day. Eventually, by about 5:00 PM the crowd had exhausted itself, and everybody went home feeling pretty good about what they had done, celebrating Sunday in this way. There was nothing left of “Transportes Sanchez”, of course. This is the kind of thing that you don't

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expect to run into in Appleton, Wisconsin, but you must be prepared to encounter and cope with in Third World countries.

Q: When the forces of order break down, they break down completely, and exhaustion is the only real protection that you have. These were really memorable events. They don't happen to everybody, and the fact that they happened so close to where you lived was a matter of concern for you, I'm sure.

HELBLE: There's one other, personal story that I'll add to my recollections of Puerto La Cruz, and then we can move on to the next assignment.

In June, 1959, a couple of months before I was scheduled to leave Puerto La Cruz, I went with a friend, Charles McKay, a colleague who worked in our office, to pick up a sailboat in Trinidad. He was actually a CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] officer who had been assigned to our Consulate about a year previously. He loved sailing and had been born and raised in Florida. I'm still in touch with him. He's a very successful businessman in Miami now.

As I say, at the time he wanted to buy a sailboat. He bought a 29', Hong Kong built, teak sloop in Trinidad. He needed a crew to sail it from Trinidad to Puerto La Cruz, which was approximately a 48 hour sail. I knew nothing about sailing a boat but I was game to go along. Charley's brother came down from Florida. He didn't know much about sailing, either. Then a Venezuelan friend of ours, who worked for an American company, volunteered to be the fourth crew member. He had done a little bit of sailing, but not much.

Q: Charley McKay, the owner of the boat, had done a good bit of sailing?

HELBLE: The owner of the boat had his Coast Guard Master of Sail papers for anything up to 100 displacement tons. He knew a lot about sailing. The four of us went over to Trinidad and spent a day and a half purchasing supplies, obtaining insurance, and outfitting the boat. Early on a Friday morning we left Port of Spain, Trinidad, and put to

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sea in what turned out to be very heavy weather. This was not what this somewhat limited crew needed for its first day at sea. I recall that the captain, Charley McKay, judged that the swells were 20'. With a 29' bobbing sailboat, that sort of floored us. It made for an "interesting" first six or eight hours at sea.

We crossed the straits, known as the "Boca del Dragon" [the "Dragon's Mouth"] between Trinidad and the coast of eastern Venezuela. Heavy seas had earned its name for this strait.

Q: Were the peaks of the swells very far apart or were they close together? It makes a difference, because short, steep swells are much more difficult and dangerous to get through than swells whose peaks are farther apart.

HELBLE: I had never been in such seas and I couldn't give you a proportionate relationship.

Q: You didn't measure them.

HELBLE: I didn't measure them. All I know is that I was looking down into a trough one second, and the next second there was a wall of water right above me. It was a rather unnerving experience. Fortunately, none of us was seasick.

Q: You couldn't think of anything else except survival. I shouldn't laugh.

HELBLE: Right. I will omit some of the hour by hour details. In any event, to get to the point of the story, having left on Friday morning, we were along the Venezuelan coast by late Saturday afternoon. As we had done the previous day, it was time to pull away from the coast a bit for night time sailing and stay away from the shoreline. So, as dusk was falling, we started to put out to sea. When it was fully dark, we had two-man watches in rotation. I had the bow watch. I said to the captain, who was at the tiller at the time, "There are some lights over on the starboard side. What are they?" He pulled out his copy of

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the "West Indian Sailing Directions," looked at it, and then said, "It must be a fishing fleet because there's no land around here." So we continued on. Eventually, I said, "You know, near those lights there's a profile of land. It seems to separate the sea from the sky." He looked at the horizon and said, "I don't think so." Then he said, "I'll look again at the 'West Indian Sailing Directions.'" He did this.

Q: Was this a chart, or simply a description of the coast?

HELBLE: The "Sailing Directions" was a big book.

Q: Did he have a chart?

HELBLE: He had charts. After looking at all of this, he said, "No, it's a fishing fleet. There's no land in profile there. You know, if you're not a regular sailor, your eyes play tricks on you at night. I'm an experienced sailor, and we're in open ocean."

Around 11:00 PM the watch switched. I went below, and one of the others took over the bow watch. As he was approaching the bow, and I was in the cabin, suddenly there was a grinding noise and a violent lurch of the boat to one side. Everything stopped. Almost instantly, through the deck of the cabin, came a rush of water. Feeling that something was wrong [Laughter], I called out to the captain, who happened to be in the "head" at the moment, "We're taking aboard water." Well, the long and short of it was that we had run up on a reef and had done what turned out to be "terminal damage" to the boat in terms of its ability to remain afloat. The boat lodged sideways on the reef and rocked rather violently back and forth in the surf...

Q: Damaging the hull further.

HELBLE: Damaging it further. An effort to start the auxiliary motor was unsuccessful. We were trying to back off the reef, but that would only have made the boat flood that much faster. The motor was flooded. We had three flares on board. I got them, went to the

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cockpit, and tried to fire them off. The first two failed to ignite. The third flare ignited, went up about to the top of the mast and immediately came down. It was up no more than three seconds. This was a fruitless effort. It was obvious that nothing was in sight.

Q: Was the visibility reasonably good?

HELBLE: Visibility was perfect. The stars were out. The dolphins had been swimming along the side of the boat.

Q: They left before you hit the reef.

HELBLE: That's right. They didn't...

Q: They knew that it was there.

HELBLE: Right. We realized that we were sinking. We had a small, two-man dinghy lashed to the deck. We had two inflatable tubes, gas operated, which fit around your tummy. We decided that we had to find out whether there was anything above the water level in the vicinity. Since this was a reef, maybe there was a rock that was out of the water. We lashed a line around the Venezuelan, who was a very good swimmer. Meanwhile, the boat was on its side, at an angle, slowly sliding down the reef, with the deck disappearing underneath the waves. We kept moving to the higher side of the deck. The Venezuelan swam off in one direction. We had about 100' of line. He attempted to assess the direction in which the reef seemed to lie. When he got to the end of the 100' of line, he tugged on the line, and we hauled him back. He said that there was nothing there. We decided that we would have to try the other side of the boat. By that time the three of us still on board were sitting on the railing, which was just about all of the boat which remained above the water. The Venezuelan swam off again. We had perhaps 20' of line left when he tugged. We hauled him back. By now we were up to our waists in water. He said, "There's a rock down there." We had loaded the two-man dinghy, which was damaged from having been pinned between the sailboat and the reef and was leaking to

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some extent. We loaded the dinghy with some emergency supplies—the little food that we had on board and a blanket.

Q: Did you have any water?

HELBLE: We didn't have any water, as such, but we had several cans with juice in them. I remember that we had some canned plums. My Boy Scout training led me to issue to each of us a quantity of matches wrapped in waxed paper, which we tucked into our swimming suits.

We slid into the water at this point and towed the dinghy to the rock, which was about 12' across and about two feet above the water level. We climbed up on the rock, grateful that we had found it. By now the sailboat had sunk.

Q: You mentioned that the visibility was good, in the sense that it was clear. You had previously mentioned that there seemed to be a light somewhere in the vicinity.

HELBLE: Well, a long distance away from us was a series of lights. By the time we struck the reef, we had passed that area. Right around us there was nothing but darkness. There was no moon. An hour had passed since we had been in the general vicinity of the lights I mentioned previously.

We considered our situation on the rock, but there wasn't much we could do until dawn, when we would be able to see where we were. Sure enough, when dawn came, we could see the Venezuelan coast off to the West. We estimated that it was about five miles away. Incidentally, the lights to which I earlier referred had been off to the East. In any event, we could see the coast but thought that that would be a long swim. We didn't think that it would be prudent to try to swim five miles or so to land.

So we sat there and opened the can of plums. We each had one plum. I had a can of peanuts. We all had three or four peanuts each. That was breakfast. We had salvaged a

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can of kerosene, a can of gasoline, and a piece of the sail, in addition to the blanket. As it turned out, our matches had stayed dry, despite our swim to the rock.

We watched the sun come up, maybe an hour or so after first light. Suddenly, in the distance East of us we spotted a small sail, which we thought was a local fishing boat. Well, this was the first sign of activity that we had seen. We immediately took the piece of the sail, poured some gasoline on it to ignite it and kerosene to make smoke. Using these fuels, we lit ourselves a signal fire, which gave off a fairly reasonable, black plume of smoke. The sailboat seemed to come towards us for a few minutes and then seemed to go away. This went on for some time but, as a matter of fact, it was coming closer to us, because it was just “tacking” back and forth into the wind. The four of us held the blanket at each corner and threw it up as high as we could, while still holding onto it. We continued to do this and to pour kerosene on the fire to make smoke, until the fishing vessel was about 100 yards from our rock. The fisherman had obviously seen us a long time before, but we were not taking any chance that he might go away.

So we were rescued, at that point. When we discussed our rescue the following week, it turned out that two of us had been convinced, when the sailboat was sinking and we were out in the blackness of “nothing” that we were “goners.” However, two of us were convinced that we would survive. I was among the “pessimists.”

Q: You didn't think that you were going to make it.

HELBLE: No. I thought that this was “it.” I felt that it was very unfair because Joan, my wife, was back in Puerto La Cruz at a beach party “scavenger hunt” at the very time that I was sinking in the Caribbean Sea. I thought that she was having a great time, while my life was ending here, and she was totally unaware of it. I didn't feel that that was “fair.”

That's a personal story that will remain with me all my life. As a footnote, we were taken by the fishing boat that rescued us to a small island. A Police vessel took us to Isla de Margarita, about 20 miles North of the coast of Venezuela. In fact, that was the very island

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which we had seen earlier, on the evening that we lost the boat. Due to an erroneous sighting along the coast of Venezuela, late that afternoon and just before dark, we had made a mistake in identifying a certain rock. We were about eight miles to the East of where we thought we were, when the sailboat went up on the reef. Had we been where we were supposed to be, we would not have gone up on the reef.

Q: This can go under the heading, "The Things That Happen to a Vice Consul."

HELBLE: Yes, and "Life in the Foreign Service; the Opportunities That You See..."

Q: And the opportunities for travel. Well, when did you leave Puerto La Cruz?

HELBLE: We left Puerto La Cruz in August, 1959. I had requested Chinese language training for my next assignment. I was informed by Personnel that there was a surplus of Chinese language officers and applicants for this kind of training. Since I had put down Vietnamese language training as my second choice, I was given that assignment.

So, after a brief leave, I went back to Washington and reported in to the Foreign Service Institute and began a nine-month, intensive period of training in Vietnamese.

Q: This was in the garage or the basement of Arlington Towers.

HELBLE: That's right. The old FSI.

Q: How was the course organized? I'm covering ground which I know very well because I was one of the other two Foreign Service Officers in the course with you. However, this is to record your experience.

HELBLE: It would be an exaggeration to say that the course was well organized. There were three FSO's in the class, one of whom is the interviewer, Tom Conlon; the second one was Jim Montgomery; and myself. Tom was very much the senior and more experienced. He had already had several assignments overseas and knew much more

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about the Foreign Service than Jim Montgomery and I. I had just had the assignment to Puerto La Cruz. Jim Montgomery had not yet had an overseas assignment.

Q: He was working in Personnel, wasn't he?

HELBLE: I believe that he was. In any event the three of us had a Vietnamese tutor, Dinh van Ban, who had been teaching for a couple of years, at least, at the Foreign Service Institute. He also had a full-time job in the Vietnamese service of the Voice of America. He started this job in the wee hours of the morning. Frequently, our class did not start until 11:00 AM. Then we would go on until late in the afternoon. The routine was six hours of classroom time, as a general rule, with some relief due to our participation in the Southeast Asian studies course which accompanied all of the Southeast Asian language training courses at the Foreign Service Institute.

Q: In addition to Dinh van Ban, there was an American linguist, wasn't there?

HELBLE: An American linguist named James Bostain. He was rather a renowned "character" at the Foreign Service Institute. Indeed, he had had a great deal of language training and was a very interesting man.

Q: Do you remember that story about one of his lectures? He was a very good lecturer. One of his lectures concerned "cultural shock." Remember that one?

HELBLE: I remember some of that "cultural shock."

Q: Well, he would be speaking to people who were going to live in a foreign atmosphere overseas. He would say, "Now, I'm going to do something that may shock some of you," and with that he unzipped his fly. He didn't actually go beyond that, but immediately he got screams from some of the women in his class. He then said, "You've made my point. That kind of behavior is unacceptable in the United States. However, in many societies it is not particularly significant and no one is shocked at it."

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HELBLER: Right.

Q: Bostain was a good linguist, in fact, but I don't think that his heart was really in it.

HELBLER: The days in the Vietnamese class were long and essentially tedious. The class time frequently degenerated into story telling in English, particularly when our weary tutor, who was on his second job of the day and was never able to get enough sleep, would fall fast asleep. He was a very nice fellow who related well to us, as we did to him. It was an enjoyable group. One thing that I very quickly learned, in the first couple of weeks, was that I had not had a lot of association with "brilliant" FSO's in my Puerto La Cruz assignment. I worked with three real "losers." There had been only one "sound" fellow to associate with during the previous two years. I rapidly learned, in the company I was keeping in this particular class, that I was the "dumbest" of the three...

Q: I doubt that.

HELBLER: And you fellows knew a lot more about just about anything than I did. However, you tolerated me. We got along very well and became lifelong friends through that experience.

I recall that I was delighted when the class finally ended in June, 1960. We were, of course, all assigned to the Embassy in Saigon. My initial orders said that I was to be Assistant Personnel Officer in Saigon. Tom Conlon was assigned as a Second Secretary in the Political Section, and Jim Montgomery was assigned as a Third Secretary in the Economic Section.

When my family and I arrived in Saigon, the Montgomery's had been there for all of 24 hours. Tom, I think that you were also there, although I don't recall exactly if you arrived a day or two earlier.

Q: We all arrived in Saigon at about the same time.

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HELBLE: We arrived at about the same time. When my family and I arrived in Saigon, I was met by an Embassy representative and informed that my orders had been changed. I would be a Third Secretary in the Political Section. This was fine with me. Again, whatever the Service said was what I was going to do.

In retrospect, my change was fortunate in terms of my subsequent career activities and assignments. That's just the way the ball bounces, sometimes. Sometimes it bounces in your direction and sometimes it doesn't.

Q: That's so true, and timing is so much. I would just correct one point that you made there. I was actually assigned as Consul in Hue. When I arrived in Saigon, the Ambassador was Elbridge Durbrow, whom I had served under previously in Singapore, when he was Consul General. He told me, "Tom, we're going to keep you here in Saigon for about three months until you get used to Vietnam, before you go up to Hue. You'll be on TDY, you'll be in an Embassy house," and so forth. So I thought, "Why not?" "Durby" was a friend. Saigon was a good experience. At the end of three months "Durby" said, "Well, we're going to keep you for three more months in Saigon." I was still on per diem, still living in an Embassy house, and had no complaint about that. Then, at the end of six months, "Durby" said, "Well, you're going to stay in Saigon. You're not going to go to Hue."

I was sorry about this because I knew, from my previous experience with the Indonesian language, that you need a period after the FSI training—whether it's a "good" FSI program or not—to put it all together, walk down the street, talk to shopkeepers and merchants, and develop your knowledge of the language. I never really had this opportunity in Saigon. I knew that I would never really be able to speak Vietnamese fluently. That's the way it turned out to be. I look back on this as if I were in an aircraft at the head of the runway, revving up the engines, but never getting them running fast enough to take off.

HELBLE: Your description of your intended and actual assignments during that year [1960-1961] is consistent with my recollection. I had forgotten that you were not initially

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assigned as Second Secretary to Saigon. We knew that you were supposed to go to Hue as Consul, but you were retained in Saigon for basic grounding in the Vietnamese political scene.

To jump ahead, and this will come out sooner or later, so I'll say it right now. It was shortly after the visit to Saigon of Vice President Lyndon Johnson in May, 1961 that I was called in by the Ambassador and told that I was going as Consul to Hue and that I would leave in three weeks. This came as a complete shock to me. Then I felt very badly because I knew that Tom Conlon had been very anxious to go to Hue, looked forward to it and prepared for it. He and his sizeable family were counting on it. However, there was a change of orders and, in retrospect, it was my good fortune that I had that opportunity.

Q: I thought so. I thought that it was a good opportunity for you and I certainly had no feelings of annoyance toward you. You had nothing to do with it. This was Ambassador Durbrow's decision. I thought very highly of him and got a lot out of the Saigon assignment. What I did not get out of it was a chance to develop my ability to speak Vietnamese comfortably. I never reached that point. I can say a few things and would never starve, but that would be all.

HELBLE: Well, Durby's explanation to me was that you had become too valuable in the Political Section to spare you for Hue. [Laughter] So I got the message that I wasn't valuable and probably was expendable. [Laughter]

Q: John, one thing that you passed over. Maybe you intended to do this, but in November, 1960, a few months after you had gotten to Saigon, there was an attempt to overthrow the Vietnamese Government of President Ngo Dinh Diem. I saw part of this. I made my way down to the Embassy fairly quickly from my house and helped with the reporting. But you had a unique perspective, and you might go into that.

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HELBLE: I'll go into that. As I said, I just "jumped ahead" for a moment to describe what happened in May, 1961, in terms of our respective assignments.

I was the "low man on the totem pole" in the Political Section, an appropriate status for me, with my background. My duties were of lesser, if not minor interest to the Political Section.

Q: What sort of things?

HELBLE: I "covered" North Vietnam, but, of course, "covering" North Vietnam basically meant reading the Foreign Broadcast Information Service daily output, the FBIS, as it was known. I tried, in a rather hopeless manner, to interpret what was going on in North Vietnam through that medium. It was the only thing I had going in many respects, although I received some intelligence reports which were of marginal value. I was also given responsibility for following developments in Laos and "agrovilles," projects which President Diem had recently created. These were, in a sense, model community farms in the rural areas. That project received a lot of "ballyhooing" and promotion from the government. It never "took off" in any meaningful sense. Visitors were taken to visit "agrovilles" which had been opened, and celebrations were held. This project had a "Potemkin-like" character. Banana trees which had been cut off the night before from some neighboring orchard were planted along the roadways. They might last one day in the soil, just long enough for the opening ceremony.

Q: I think that Diem really believed that these programs were making progress. However, as you say, they never really "took hold." The concept itself was, I think, fatally flawed.

HELBLE: The responsibility for following agrovilles didn't enhance my status a great deal in the Political Section, as far as I was concerned. However, it was assigned to me. I became interested in it and became engrossed in this and other work.

I recall vividly, just four weeks after I arrived in Vietnam in early August, 1960, suddenly being summoned to Ambassador Durbrow's office, an experience which, at that stage in

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my life, awed me somewhat. Also present in the Ambassador's office were the Deputy Chief of Mission, Francis Cunningham, and the Political Counselor, Joseph A. Mendenhall. Durby, who was known as a rather rough, "barky" type individual, looked at me and said, "Helble, who the hell is Kong Le?" I had not the foggiest idea of who Kong Le was. I had to admit that I didn't know. The Ambassador said, "Well, you're following Laotian events, aren't you?" I said, "Yes, sir, but I just started." [Laughter] I admitted that I didn't know who Kong Le was. Well, he wouldn't be asking me, with all that seasoned talent at his side...

Q: They didn't know, either!

HELBLE: No. Of course, Kong Le was an obscure captain and battalion commander in Vientiane, Laos, who had just pulled off a coup d'etat. This was further evidence that I had some things yet to be learned in life. I certainly came to know who Kong Le was after that.

Q: Considering the amount of effort that we put into Vietnam, as well as Laos and Cambodia, too, I thought that the preparations made to underpin our policies were quite poor. We didn't have people in INR [Bureau of Intelligence Research] or on the desk in the Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs who knew very much about Indochina as a whole. The desk officer was Paul Kattenburg, who visited Vietnam once in 1952 and spent six weeks in the Red River Delta in North Vietnam. He didn't visit there again until after the Diem government was overthrown in 1963. He didn't know much about Vietnam, didn't know any Vietnamese, and took a very European "colonialist" view of the whole situation. In INR there was nobody following Vietnam in any consistent way. We just had no preparation for what was to come.

HELBLE: Yes, and we learned during our Vietnamese language lessons at the FSI that there wasn't a great deal of expertise around that we could draw on prior to our departure for Vietnam.

The 10 months that I spent in the Political Section certainly were of great value to me in terms of learning much more about the Foreign Service as it operates overseas, how

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a Political Section functions, and what the procedures, standards, requirements, and demands are. All of this was new to me. As I mentioned earlier, I had done some political reporting in Puerto La Cruz, Venezuela, but it was self-generated and self-guided. My efforts were based on nearly total ignorance about how to go about political reporting.

Q: One thing I thought about the Political Section at that time and have often thought about it since then was that it was a reasonably good section. The Political Counselor, Joe Mendenhall, was, in my view, one of the best Political Counselors I've ever run across. He was the most organized guy that I ever knew. You may have had a different view of Joe Mendenhall, but I thought that he was exceedingly capable and very intelligent. What used to "get" me was that he would remember things that he told me to do three weeks previously and which I may have forgotten about. Then I learned how he did this. He had a yellow, ruled, legal size tablet. He would write down what he asked me to do and date it. Then he'd keep on asking me about it until I did it.

HELBLE: I, of course, thought that he was first rate, without much basis for comparison available to me. As I said, I had three absolutely "horrific" bosses in Puerto La Cruz, so Mendenhall could have been a lot poorer as a supervisor and officer than he was, and I would have been impressed.

I thought very highly of Mendenhall. We are still good friends to this day and see each other periodically. He certainly taught me a lot. He was "demanding," in a sense, but not unreasonably so. As you say, he was highly organized. Over the years I've certainly learned that I'm a "Type A" personality i. e., an activist. However, Mendenhall was a "Type AAA" person. It wasn't bad training that I had from him, by any means. It was good for me.

Q: One thing that came up in Saigon. You may have seen this, too, and I'd appreciate your perspective on it. I certainly was aware that there was really no great love lost between the Ambassador and Francis Cunningham, the DCM. The Ambassador tended to "bypass"

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Francis and deal directly with Joe Mendenhall. This helped in the functioning of the Mission, but it's not a good way to do business.

HELBLE: It's not the "ideal" way, but you have to deal with the talent that you have available. In Durby's case, the DCM he had available had no talent whatsoever. Francis Cunningham was a "gutless wonder" who really didn't have the foggiest idea of how to run a diplomatic mission or how to serve the Ambassador as a useful adviser. Durby's turning to Mendenhall as his principal adviser and the man who would "get things done" was simply the only course of action available to Durby as far as I could see.

Q: What do you think of this situation? I've seen cases like this, and maybe you have, too, where there obviously was friction and no love lost between the Ambassador and the DCM. In such situations some Ambassadors have been tough enough to say to the DCM, "Look, it's time for you to go. I'll ask the Department to get you a good post, but this is not the one for you. I'm going to ask for your relief."

HELBLE: That's one possible course of action. Another possible course of action would be for the DCM in such a situation to initiate this himself. However...

Q: That's drastic action.

HELBLE: It is. I think that generally, unless the situation is terribly acute, people try to "cope" with it and...

Q: It wasn't that acute.

HELBLE: No, I don't think that it was. Most Ambassadors "jury rig" the situation, as Durby did, using Mendenhall instead of Cunningham.

I certainly learned about journalists overseas for the first time in Saigon in following events in North Vietnam, as I did, since nobody else was assigned to that or had any more expertise than I did. In fact, the term "expertise" is a gross exaggeration. If a journalist

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came to Saigon and wanted to talk to somebody in the Embassy about North Vietnam, I was “it.” I recall vividly the encounter I had with Joe Alsop, a famous columnist who had his own orientation toward life.

Alsop came to see me, and I was rapidly developing what became my standard briefing on North Vietnam. After a few minutes it was evident that he was not interested in the things that I was saying. He was only interested in certain things that would buttress his already established convictions on the subject. I thought that this was a peculiar way of operating as a journalist. I thought that he should have had a broad perspective of events, and so forth—and not just focus on the things that would buttress his own views, as expressed in his weekly column. I had other experiences with journalists, as most Foreign Service Officers have. Looking down the pike five years subsequently, I had the same kind of experience in dealing with Joe Kraft, another well known columnist. Joe Kraft always knew what he wanted as evidence to support his views.

Q: This is still in the Vietnam context?

HELBLE: Yes. So I got another perspective on life in the Foreign Service, as I had the opportunity for the first time to deal with journalists. Of course, in the succeeding years in Saigon and in Hue and associated with Vietnam, I had many “exposures” to the press—to its strong points, in some cases, and certainly, in many cases, its very weak points. I had many such opportunities in the years ahead. But that was the first time I had to deal with this problem.

Q: One thing struck me, and I thought about it a lot because I also dealt with the press a great deal over the years in Vietnam—and elsewhere, too. I think that the Vietnam experience was quite unique. Before that time journalists tended to be more or less “on our side,” if I may put it that way. During most of the Vietnam experience, they tended to be highly critical of our policies. However, after the Vietnam war, they tended to be “on our

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side” again. Vietnam was a case all by itself. I never fully understand why it should have been this way. Did it strike you this way? Do you have any views on this?

HELBLE: Well, this is a fairly broad question. There were certainly many young journalists who came to Saigon, sent by their editors because they were eager to get into the battle, sometimes quite literally. In the early 1960's Vietnam was not yet the issue of great political significance in the United States which it had become by the late 1960's. There were a lot of young, “hard charging” journalists running around who lacked the same perspective that I lacked as a Third Secretary in the Political Section, in terms of any direct background and experience in dealing with a totally unique situation—to them as well as to me. The difference between them and me was that they had access to publication on a global basis with their views, observations, and reporting. They were able to make very significant “names” for themselves in their profession. They tended to adhere to the proposition that “good news” is “no news” in terms of the world of journalism. They recognized that. There were many opportunities in Vietnam to depict situations in relatively stark terms. Actually, the situation in Vietnam was very complex, with no “blacks” and “whites” but many shades of “gray.” You don't sell newspapers based on a profound, “in depth” article on the complexities of the situation. They wanted dramatic headlines, particularly as American troops became involved and the audience in the United States was very keenly attuned to the situation.

Q: Since you were dealing with North Vietnam as best you could, did you have much to do with the International Control Commission [ICC]?

HELBLE: I did not directly. One of my colleagues, Andy Fink, whom you will recall, principally followed the ICC in the Political Section. He handled liaison with the ICC. I read some of Andy's reporting and certainly met some of the Canadians and Indians in the ICC. I don't recall at that time meeting any of the Poles involved. I recall encountering a number of Poles at social or “after hour” functions. I mostly recall long discussions with Andy Fink

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about the “hopelessness” of this organization, the ICC, particularly the “duplicity” of the Indians and the “frustrations” of the Canadians.

Q: I think that the Canadians did everything that they could to be straightforward.

HELBLE: They did. They were just outvoted. Of course, they had no “enforcement” powers of any significance. This was a lesson which I bore in mind. Jumping ahead again to January, 1973, I was assigned to the Embassy in Saigon for six months on a TDY [Temporary Duty] basis, as you were, too.

My post of assignment was the Embassy in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. I came back on TDY to Saigon and was given responsibility to assist in the physical establishment of the ICCS [International Commission of Control and Supervision], in effect something of a successor organization to the ICC. I served as the liaison officer of the Embassy in Saigon with the ICCS. The lessons learned about the failure of the ICC were still quite fresh in my mind a dozen years later.

Q: Anything else about your time in Saigon?

HELBLE: The “highlight,” of course, was the matter to which you referred, the attempted coup d'etat against President Diem on November 11 and 12, 1960. In my case I was scheduled to go to Angkor Wat in Cambodia, with my family and with Andy Fink, whom I just mentioned, and his family. Angkor Wat was a place that I had heard a great deal about, and I was anxious to see it. We had all of our arrangements in hand.

On the morning of November 11, at about 3:30 AM, one of our servants, who lived in quarters just behind our house, came into the house, knocked on our door, and told us that the Viet Cong were attacking Saigon. I went outside and could hear firing going on. I lived approximately a half mile from the Presidential Palace, where the shooting appeared to be going on. It was dark, and I didn't see anything that I could or should do at that point. So we went back to bed.

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About 6:00 AM Andy Fink came to my house. He said, "There's a coup going on against Diem. They've closed the airport. We're going to have to cancel our trip." Well, I thought, that's the way it is. Even though I had leave scheduled, obviously, under the circumstances, I said to myself, "I guess I have to go to work." I started walking toward the Embassy. Normally, I would take a cab, but the Presidential Palace was between my house and the Embassy. I walked toward the Palace. I thought that at least I could see what was going on and perhaps I would have some useful, fresh information to report to the Embassy when I got there.

I walked along the west side of the Palace, Hong Thap Tu Avenue, heading toward Cong Ly Avenue.

Q: Was the firing still going on then?

HELBLE: There was no firing at that moment. There had been some firing still going on when I started to walk to the Embassy, but as I got close to the Palace, the firing ceased completely. As I walked along Hong Thap Tu Avenue, I couldn't see anything going on of any great interest.

I turned East on Cong Ly Avenue, the street which ran in front of the Presidential Palace...

Q: On the North side of the Palace.

HELBLE: On the North side. I noticed that the good-sized plaza or park in front of the Presidential Palace had a large number of ARVN [Vietnamese Army] troops in it. I continued to walk blithely along Cong Ly Avenue, as there was no firing. Then I noticed a jeep which had been shot up right near the front gate of the Palace and the body of a soldier lying in the street. I now noticed that the troops I mentioned before were all taking cover behind the numerous trees in the park.

Q: They were in cover, and you were not.

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HELBLE: They were all looking at the Palace, with their guns “at the ready.” I was about 20 feet from the fence on the North side of the Palace, approaching the front gate. Then I saw another body and began to realize that “something had been going on here.” [Laughter] In any event, since I saw no one inside the Palace gate, I started talking to a young Vietnamese Army lieutenant from the Paratroop Battalion, who was standing behind one of the trees. As it turned out, his battalion was deployed in that area. I asked him, “Are the Viet Cong inside the palace?” That was all that I knew at the time. I had had only one, relatively unreliable source - one of my household servants who had said that the Viet Cong were attacking the Palace. Then Andy Fink told me that there was a coup going on against President Diem. The lieutenant said that the VC [Viet Cong] were in the Palace.

Suddenly, troops on the outside, where I was, began to shoot at the Palace, and there was return fire from the various buildings within the fenced perimeter around the Palace. I was somewhat exposed. There wasn't a tree available behind which an ARVN paratrooper had not already taken cover. I suppose that I could have just laid down on the ground but I would have been fairly visible there. I ducked down and scurried as fast as I could to the west side of the park, Alexandre de Rhodes Avenue. There was a large, masonry wall surrounding a villa there which was a common sight. The wall was about four feet high. I jumped over the wall and lay there, inside it. I felt that I was secure there. Bullets were flying around. The firing continued for several minutes, then slowed down and stopped.

I was lying there, wondering what to do, when a voice came from above me, saying, “John, what the hell are you doing down there?” I looked up, and there was Bill Colby, the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] Chief of Station in the Embassy, standing on his balcony above me. He had obviously come out when the firing stopped, saw me lying down there, and recognized me. I joined him in his house. He'd been trying to get to the Embassy, but there was just a little too much “action” in the neighborhood for him to move out safely. His wife, Barbara, and, as I recall, four children were in the house. He didn't feel that he could

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leave them. He had been in touch with the Embassy on the telephone, but he really had to get to the Embassy to perform his official functions.

After a while, Colby said, "Would you stay here and look after Barbara and the kids? I'll slip out the back way, make my way out of this, and get to the office." So I agreed to do so. I spent the morning there with Barbara Colby and her children, under intermittent fire. His house, incidentally, had been "riddled" by stray bullets, although it was not seriously damaged. There were holes in the walls.

Q: Glass broken?

HELBLE: I don't recall broken glass, but I remember a number of holes in the walls. Colby's family stayed on the lower level, toward the back of the house, in a windowless area. Periodically, I would go out on the balcony and look around to see what was happening. Then I would call the Embassy and give them an oral report of what I was able to see.

Q: I might add that you were our "OP" [Observation Post] and were in a "very good position," because you were right at the center of the action. We valued that very, very much. It happened, as you recall, that the civilian telephone system was not affected at all by the coup. The military telephone system had been cut off. Somehow, the coup planners had not thought to cut off the civilian telephone system. So at the Embassy whenever we were bored or short of something to report, we'd say, "Let's give John a call." We'd call you and find out whether you were still there.

HELBLE: To move on several hours, to nightfall that night, by that time there were tanks and armored personnel carriers APC's which had come in supposedly to support the coup d'etat forces. I remember that there was one tank parked right in front of Colby's house which had turned its turret so that I was looking right down the barrel of its gun. It was aimed right at Colby's balcony.

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I was rather uneasy about this. Furthermore, various ARVN troops had taken up positions behind the same wall that I had sheltered behind.

Q: They may have seen you go over that wall.

HELBLE: There was an ARVN officer there with a radio, which was crackling out messages back and forth—communications with other units around there. When dusk fell, and there was no firing going on, I requested that the Embassy NOT call me. I would call the Embassy if anything changed, because I thought that if the phone were ringing in the house right next to these troops, it would be an invitation to intrusion, at least. It was a one-way calling system, but, yes, I initially did get some calls.

Earlier in the afternoon of November 11 Colby asked if I could get his family out of the house, if I had any opportunity to do so. The firing was sporadic and intermittent. It wasn't going on continuously. It would last for a few minutes at a time, with not much damage being done that I could see to either side. During one of the lulls I talked to the lieutenant who was running a little Command Post in the front yard of the Colby house. I told him that there was a woman and four children in the house and that I would like to get some kind of "safe conduct" arrangement to guarantee that I could get them out. All I would need was five minutes or so. He did some communicating on his radio. Eventually, he went forward with a white flag to the front gate of the Palace. A couple of Palace Guards came out to the gate, and they talked. The lieutenant returned to the house and said, "OK, you can take them out now. We have agreed that there will be no firing." There might not have been any firing anyway, but I felt a little better about having made this arrangement.

Q: A wise precaution.

HELBLE: So Barbara Colby and her children were able to leave, and I remained there, alone, for the rest of the afternoon and half of the following day. I helped myself to

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the refrigerator, for which I later wrote Barbara a proper “bread and butter” note of appreciation.

Q: I think that I saw that note. I seem to recall that Barbara Colby showed it to us.

HELBLE: The ARVN paratroopers had been there all day. A contingent of troops with APC's and tanks—a total of 13 armored vehicles—approached the square from the Cathedral north of the Palace. They were greeted with cheers from the paratroopers. There was some conversation between the commanders on the scene. The tanks moved into the park and took up positions pointing the muzzles of their guns at the Palace. Eventually, the paratroopers formed up into a proper line and marched out of the square. I had assumed that they had been relieved by a unit of the 24th ARVN Division from Can Tho, which, according to information phoned to me by the Embassy, had just arrived in Saigon. Is that correct?

Q: Yes.

HELBLE: Well, within 15-20 minutes after the paratroopers cleared the area, the tanks started up their engines, turned around, and pointed the muzzles of their guns “away” from the Palace. I duly reported this to the Embassy by phone. I thought that this was rather “strange.” Of course, I was totally unaware of the fact that President Diem had been in communication with the commander of the 24th ARVN Division. They had come up to Saigon from Can Tho in the South in the guise of supporting the coup attempt and then, right before my very eyes, “double crossed” the paratroopers. [Laughter] I just couldn't figure out what was going on there at this point. However, as I said, when the tanks stopped maneuvering and settled in for the night, I was again looking down the barrel of the gun on one of those tanks!

In any event, the night passed quietly. Early on the following morning November 12, 1960, literally at the crack of dawn, I was awakened by a series of explosions. I peered out cautiously and saw all sorts of “red objects” sailing through the air and landing in the

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general vicinity of the Palace. I did not see any of these rounds hit the Palace directly. They fell on the grounds outside it. While this was going on, I got a call from the Embassy. They told me, "You'd better take cover. The coup forces out near the airport are going to be shelling the Palace." I said, "They're not 'going to be' but are doing it." [Laughter] In any event, while that was "intense fire" for me, in retrospect I think that there weren't that many rounds fired. However, at that point I had never been under any sort of artillery or rocket attack.

Q: You find out a lot when you're close up.

HELBLE: That's right. In any event, there was no attack on the ground accompanying the shelling of the Palace by the coup forces. There was no shooting in the area, other than the "incoming" artillery rounds.

The next several hours unfolded as follows. As I recall, just before 8:00 AM I could see Saigon traffic moving "normally" a block and a half away from the Palace. People were on their bicycles, "xyclos" bicycle trishaws were going back and forth, and people were headed for work or for the market, just avoiding the immediate area around the Palace. This was a curious anomaly, because here I was in the midst of an armed camp, with sporadic shelling and firing. Everybody else was going about their business as if nothing was happening. I found this situation "curious," to say the least.

Beginning around 8:00 AM some people had been gathering near the Palace gates, in front of the tanks and the APC's. Then up came a jeep which stopped, and an officer got out of it. He appeared to be a paratroop officer, as he wore a red beret. He proceeded to jump up on the front of a tank which was closest to the crowd. He started to harangue them, but I couldn't hear what he was saying. He had a "bull horn." The crowd numbered perhaps 2,000 or less. Basically, they looked to me like curious onlookers. He spoke to them for several minutes and then, as if he had given a command, the front ranks of the crowd started to surge down the main street Dai Lo Thong Nhat toward the entrance to

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the Palace, which was a short block away, through this park area of which I have spoken. I recall an officer down behind the wall in front of Colby's house give a command over the radio. Within an instant, all of the guns of the tanks—or at least as far as I could determine—started shooting in the general direction of the crowd. The firing was being done by the machine guns on the APC's and the soldiers in the square who were facing away from the Palace, as their armored vehicles were.

Q: Toward the crowd?

HELBLE: Toward the crowd. There was an enormous din—hundreds of weapons going off simultaneously, including some “big caliber” stuff. The crowd stopped moving toward the Palace, strangely enough. Those on the edges of the crowd close to side streets or walls of villas behind which they could take cover scampered off and took cover. However, the bulk of the crowd was left in a fully exposed position in front of the troops firing at or toward them.

Q: Were the troops firing into the crowd or above their heads?

HELBLE: At this point it was not clear. However, basically, the crowd that couldn't escape down a side street “hit the ground”—just lay down on the ground. This process took what I estimated was about 45 seconds. Then, on command, everybody stopped. The crowd on the ground lay there for a while. You couldn't tell whether they were dead or alive. Gradually, one by one they got up and scampered off to a side street. There was no more firing. So finally everybody got up and fled, leaving their bicycles, “xyclos,” or whatever else behind them.

I had a pair of binoculars, so I looked at the wreckage on the street. Of course, there were some people who didn't get up. In one place I saw a head, but it didn't have a body attached to it. I certainly saw people who were wounded and in pain, as well as some not moving at all. At this point I forget what I calculated in terms of the number of casualties. However, if I recall correctly, it was something in the neighborhood of 13 to 15 people

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who had been wounded or killed. I don't remember now. I reported whatever it was to the Embassy. Certainly, several of them had been killed, while several others were badly wounded.

As it turned out, the officer who had "harangued" the crowd was the coup leader.

Q: Colonel Nguyen chanh Thi, wasn't it?

HELBLE: I believe that that was the one. He had apparently implored the crowd to "take" the Palace itself. The 24th ARVN Division, of course, had become the defenders of the Palace. For some reason they weren't prepared to tolerate the "mobs" going in to "unsettle" the President. The 24th Division troops were essentially "firing over the heads" of the crowd. As often happens in cases of this kind, some people who did not agree with the order from their commander fired into the crowd. Maybe they thought that something else should be done. They may not have been ordered to shoot into the crowd, but they did so.

In any event, that was the last, major event during the coup, from my point of view. The coup leaders fled to Cambodia, leaving from the Saigon airport, including a fellow who later became a "ward," if not close friend of mine, Col Nguyen chanh Thi, the paratroop battalion commander, who was later a general. I left the Colby residence at about 2:00 PM on November 12. I asked my superiors, jokingly, whether I was going to be charged with annual leave for the day and a half that I was absent.

Q: You did a fine job, John, and contributed a great deal to the Embassy. I mention an additional point to complete the story. As I mentioned, I was at the Embassy during this episode. We learned from CIA sources that there were contacts between the coup leaders and President Diem going on more or less throughout this whole period. Diem had been taken by surprise by the coup, but the negotiations continued. I think that Diem was

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probably “stalling,” waiting until some of the divisions outside of Saigon would come to his rescue, as they finally did.

Anyhow, by about 5:00 AM, or just as light was breaking on November 12, the word that we had, through various CIA sources, was that things had been worked out and that Diem was going to be compelled to leave office. So we thought that it was all over. Several of us who were at the Embassy trooped up onto the roof of the building. We watched the firefight in front of the Palace which you just described.

HELBLE: I was in the “fire zone.”

Q: Several rifle shots flew right over our heads, and we decided that we had better get down into cover. As we went downstairs into cover, right about that time, Ed Barbier, who was the Deputy to Bill Colby in the CIA Station, came into the Ambassador's office on the fifth floor. He had been observing the same fire fight from the parapet outside the Ambassador's office. When the stray rounds came over our heads when we were on the Embassy roof, he must have heard the same rounds and came inside the building to take cover. I remember that he had a curious expression on his face but he didn't say anything. Then, about five minutes later, I happened to notice that Ed was stretched out on a couch. Bill Colby was bending over him and had a big towel, which he was pressing to Ed's back. Evidently, one spent round buried itself in his back, in the muscle on one side or the other of his backbone. I can't remember which side. Later on, at the pool at the Cercle Sportif, I saw the scar from this wound. Bill Colby didn't know whether this was a serious wound or not. They were checking to see whether they could get medical treatment for Ed, which was finally arranged.

Going back to the negotiations between the two sides, at one point it appeared that Ambassador Durbrow might get involved in the discussions. He asked me if I would be his interpreter. Well, my Vietnamese wasn't up to that, and I had to tell him that, though I said that I'd be glad to go along with him. If we could conduct any negotiations in French,

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I could handle them, but not in Vietnamese. Well, in the event Ambassador didn't get involved in any negotiations between Diem and the coup group.

HELBLE: You, of course, wrote the definitive Embassy analysis of that coup which, as I recall, took you about three months to complete. Wasn't it done in February, 1961?

Q: Well, I don't recall. It took some time to put the whole thing together. I did what I could.

HELBLE: That was the definitive account.

Q: I thought that I'd done a very careful job in this report. Then I sent it up to Ambassador Durbrow in draft. He was usually pretty considerate of his staff, but he just didn't like this draft at all. He was puzzled by its organizational structure, which was a little different, but it was a complex sequence of events that I was trying to describe. I had to recast parts of it, and it finally went out. As you say, it was the basic Embassy report on the coup.

The problem for the Diem government was that, in effect, it had been "warned" that there was non-communist opposition to it, but Diem just didn't pay much attention to it. He didn't take it seriously and continued to operate in the same fashion as before. This led directly to a second coup in February, 1962, involving rebel Vietnamese Air Force officers who attacked the Palace. Finally, the third coup on November 2-3, 1963 was the one which finally deposed Diem, who was killed in the process.

John, is there anything else that you want to say about your first tour in Saigon?

HELBLE: There are several generalizations which I have reflected on over the years. These are things which that 10-month experience in Saigon brought to my attention, in one fashion or another, either at the time or subsequently.

Certainly, I witnessed the failure of a government which was confronted with a very experienced, organized, and essentially highly motivated enemy force, the Viet Cong, which was seeking to displace it. The Saigon Government's attributes were just the

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opposite, in a sense. It was not effectively organized, in my judgment. It lacked a political ideology, structure, and organization which would inspire people to confront successfully the type of enemy that they faced. It became increasingly evident in Saigon during the time we have just covered and subsequent years that the U. S. role was a very difficult one for us to play in a meaningful and effective way. We had very good intentions and a lot of power, but our influence was much less than one might have thought.

Q: You mentioned that the U. S. role was very difficult for us. We had trouble understanding and appreciating the situation and articulating policies to deal with it.

HELBLE: Our influence was very much affected by our inability to grasp many of the subtleties and intricacies of the Vietnamese psyche and their cultural and political thought processes. Even for myself, I would say—and probably this applied to many others—that I had the opportunity to become a Vietnamese language officer and thereby presumably had the opportunity to gain valuable, additional insight into some of these cultural and political modes of behavior. However, I know that I was a long way from understanding the Vietnamese situation adequately to make a major difference in my interpretation of things, much less provide my superiors with advice that would be ultimately successful, if followed, in addressing this complex situation.

This conclusion was only reinforced, as the years went by. Certainly, I saw it as a big problem for me, as well as for our Embassy and our foreign policy—by the time that I had finished the 10 months in Saigon. I had the opportunity to observe first hand, as did Tom Conlon and others who were in the Embassy in May, 1961, when Vice President Johnson and his fairly large entourage descended upon Saigon. The opportunity to observe the insensitivity of American politicians operating in a very different culture was certainly, at a minimum, annoying to me at the time. I think, perhaps, that this insensitivity was an element in our ultimate failure to come up with political and policy decisions which would have contributed to a consequently different outcome.

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Certainly, on the other side of that coin, while the hours were very long and the work was very intense, it was an inspiring environment for a young political officer. I had the sense that I was doing, or trying to do, something for our country and I had an almost missionary type zeal to do the best I could. That meant a lot in terms of my own gratification. It stimulated me for future years in the Foreign Service. That about wraps up the things that occurred to me for that 10 month period. It was a hell of a good training ground—no question about that.

Q: So then in June, 1961, you went up to Hue. How large was the Consulate in Hue at the time and how large a consular district did it cover?

HELBLE: Actually, I went up to Hue toward the end of May—around Memorial Day weekend—1961. I relieved Tom Barnes, who had been the Acting Consul for the previous nine months. The Consulate and the official American community consisted of a Consul; a Vice Consul who was a CIA officer operating under consular “cover”; an American administrative assistant; and two American USOM [United States Operations Mission] employees, as they were known in those days. One of them was a nurse...

Q: USOM was the predecessor of AID Agency for International Development.

HELBLE: AID in today's terms. The nurse worked with the School of Nursing affiliated with the University of Hue. She helped to develop and improve the School of Nursing, its curriculum, and so forth. The other USOM employee was a Public Safety Officer who worked with the Vietnamese police on public safety activity, training, and so forth. There was also a small detachment of the Military Assistance and Advisory Group [MAAG] of six officers and one enlisted man.

Q: Were they stationed out at the Hue airport?

HELBLE: No, they were in the city of Hue. Their residence was near the headquarters of the First Division of the Vietnamese Army, or ARVN. They were an advisory detachment

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to the First ARVN Division. I should add that there was a USIS [United States Information Service] officer. There was an American associated with the Vietnamese-American Association. He was an employee of USIS. He attempted to develop cultural activities and programs on behalf of the United States, in the Vietnamese community. There were also a couple of American missionaries or Summer Institute of Linguistics personnel who were working in rural areas outside of, but fairly close to, Hue. That was the American community. There was one Frenchman who ran the electricity power plant. There was one other officer in the Consular Corps, the Republic of China or Nationalist Chinese Consul. He did not have anything to do, as far as I could determine. He was a pleasant fellow. He was senior to me and was Dean of the Consular Corps, because he had been in Hue before I got there. We had a good but non-substantive relationship.

The Consular District consisted of the seven Northern provinces of Central Vietnam at that time. Starting south from the 17th parallel of latitude and what was known as the Demilitarized Zone [DMZ], drawn under the Geneva Accords of 1954, were the provinces of Quang Tri, along the DMZ; Thua Thien, where Hue was located; Quang Nam, with its capital in Da Nang, Quang Ngai, Qui Nhon, and Pleiku and Kontum—two provinces on the High Plateau of Central Vietnam. At one point, while I was in Hue, the province of Quang Nam was split into two provinces, so it became an eight-province consular district.

Geographically, those provinces were large, compared to many of the provinces farther South and in the Mekong River Delta area. So the consular district covered a fairly large area in territorial terms. It had a comparatively narrow, coastal plain, through which ran Route 1 from Saigon to Hanoi, often within sight of the South China Sea. However, you were rarely out of sight of the mountains of the Annamite Chain, on the western side of that highway.

Q: So it was a narrow, coastal plain.

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HELBLE: Very narrow, with vast, thinly populated mountain areas. In many places there was no population at all. Where there were people, they mostly belonged to ethnic tribes, also known as “montagnards” in French. The area was economically poor. The basis for economic activity was a modest level of agriculture. Along the coastal plain the rice fields were not nearly productive enough to sustain even the limited population that lived there. These rice fields were not as fertile and productive as the fields were in the Mekong Delta area, South of Saigon. Along the coastal plain there was no industry to speak of. There were small shops engaged in bicycle repairs and that sort of thing. There was nothing in the way of industry. The intellectual part of Central Vietnam was the city of Hue, which had been the old, imperial capital of the Vietnamese emperors. As a political center that was the source of Hue's authority throughout much of Central Vietnam. The University of Hue, the most important university in South Vietnam apart from the University of Saigon, contributed to Hue's importance as an intellectual center.

As a group, people were very different in Central Vietnam than they were in Saigon and in the Mekong Delta or in the South, in general. The people of Hue took great pride in their ancestry. As Hue was the center of the emperors' power for several centuries, they regarded themselves as morally “cleaner,” if you will, than the people in the South. Certainly, for example, dance halls and that sort of thing were strictly prohibited in Hue. One, small bar was tolerated, which would not have succeeded for 24 hours in Saigon against the competition in the national capital.

Tourism in Hue was certainly a factor because of the presence or replication, if you will, of the “great, walled city” of Peking, which had been built by the emperors. Then, after five of the emperors died, their imperial tombs were built on the western outskirts of Hue. These were architecturally, historically, and culturally very interesting structures which naturally drew a certain amount of tourism. However, Hue was in an out of the way location, and air service was relatively infrequent. The alternative, a nearly 300 mile drive up from Saigon on Route 1, took a long time. Furthermore, over the years driving up or taking the train

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to Hue to visit the tombs became less and less advisable from a security point of view. Tourism in Hue was limited under the circumstances.

Q: The Ngo family, the family of President Diem, was from Hue, if I recall.

HELBLE: That's right. I'll go into the presence of Diem's aged mother in Hue, which ultimately contributed to the "political environment." It is worth recalling. As a result, Diem himself had an attachment to Hue and came to Hue relatively frequently to see his mother.

The Central Vietnam area—and here I'm speaking of the northern 17 provinces—was politically "controlled" by Diem's brother, Ngo Dinh Can, of whom we will speak later. Can ran a very authoritarian and "tight" ship. No political dissent of any sort was permitted. Most people wouldn't even consider trying to express political dissent in the environment which emanated from Can's authority.

Q: Did you ever have much direct contact with Can?

HELBLE: Maybe we should get right into that. I would like to share with you some of my experiences with Can. I only saw Ngo Dinh Can once. I had been warned by my predecessor, Tom Barnes, that Can didn't receive American Consuls. So I waited, with as much patience as I could, for about three months after my arrival. By September, 1961, I had identified a person who was Can's top adviser and whom I could contact directly. I sought his advice and said to him that I would like to pay a call on Mr. Can. I said that I would enjoy having the opportunity to discuss with him some of the problems of the area, the local situation, and so on. In due time this intermediary got back in touch with me and said that Mr. Can would not be able to see me. However, he suggested that if I had some questions which I would like to write down, Can would be happy to send me written answers. I decided that that would not be a very useful or productive approach, so I did not follow through on that suggestion.

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I will say that Can, who was notorious for his alleged antipathy toward foreigners in general, made several gestures, or what I took as gestures, of my “acceptance” in the community, at least as far as he was concerned. Therefore, I concluded that I hadn't done anything egregiously “wrong” as yet. For example, at Christmas he would send me a large basket of a Vietnamese delicacy consisting of round, raw pork balls with spices in them, wrapped in banana leaves. They were generally eaten with the well-known Vietnamese “nuoc mam” or fish sauce.

Q: Was that supposed to be cooked or not?

HELBLE: No, it was intended to be eaten raw. I was somewhat puzzled, as was my wife Joan, as to how we were going to dispose of this quantity of the delicacy which, I would guess, weighed at least 10 kilograms [22 pounds]. We found that if we fried the pork balls like sausages, they were passable as a sausage with eggs for breakfast in the morning. We were not terribly keen about the idea of eating raw pork, even though there wasn't much evidence of trichinosis among the swine population in the area. However, conditioned as we had been against eating raw pork, we did not like the idea. We discreetly gave small amounts of the pork balls to our servant staff at Christmas or at “Tet.”

Q: Vietnamese New Year.

HELBLE: We froze what we couldn't consume in short order when we cooked it as sausage. We were concerned that the word might get out that we were giving away Mr. Can's gift to the American Consul. However, nothing adverse ever happened. The balance of it we would use at our annual reception on July 4. We would thaw it out and put it on a buffet table. We were able to use up what was an annual presentation in this manner. I took the gift of the raw pork balls as a modest gesture of acceptance from Mr. Can, at least.

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The only other, direct contact with Mr. Can before the other occasion which we will discuss later on was a personal favor that he did for me and my wife. It was, indeed, an act of generosity. This involved the death of our daughter in Vietnam. When she died, we thought of an ideal place to bury her, on a hillside in front of Emperor Tu Duc's tomb, overlooking the Huong or Perfume River, with a sensational view looking West toward the Annamite Chain of mountains, over the forest and over this placid and beautiful river. I learned that the land I proposed to use for our daughter's grave was owned by Ngo Dinh Can. With the exception of an old French bunker, which still lay in the general area, there were no other structures there. It was basically bare land, covered by a few scrub pine trees. My Vice Consul, a CIA officer, was able to obtain Can's approval for our burying our daughter on that site. It was certainly something he did not have to do.

It might be interesting to mention right at this point that in November, 1994, our daughter Mona, who was born after Cindy Lee had died, traveled on her own to Vietnam. She had never been there, as she was born after we left Vietnam. She flew into Hanoi, in North Vietnam and took the train from Hanoi to Hue. Using directions I gave her and through a contact which I had indirectly arranged for her in Hue, she was able to locate the site of Cindy Lee's grave, which had a marble marker on it. I had learned, over the years, that the grave site was being maintained. What I did not know and what she found when she located the grave was that the entire hillside has now become a Vietnamese cemetery. What her contact told her was that the Vietnamese had concluded that if that was a good enough place for the American Consul to bury his daughter, it was a good enough place for the Vietnamese to bury their dead. This was, of course, after Can had lost his authority and his land...

Q: And lost his life, too.

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HELBLE: And lost his life, as well. In any case, that is a personal anecdote which takes us way ahead of our story, but since you asked about my contacts with Can, I'll save the only direct, personal contact for later on.

Q: What kind of work were you doing in this small Consulate? Did it generate some of its own, administrative requirements? What about political or economic reporting? Did you do any consular work?

HELBLE: It was described as a “special purpose” post, which was exempted from normal, consular functions, such as protection and welfare, although, certainly, I had to be prepared to render what assistance I could if I were called on to do so. There was no substantial American community to be concerned about, in that respect. There was no passport, visa, or notarial work of any sort—in short, none of the traditional functions of a Consulate. It was there strictly as a “political listening post” to monitor events, security conditions, and the political and economic situation in Central Vietnam. It constituted an official, U. S. “presence.”

Q: Did you get instructions from the Embassy about things to follow in general or in specific terms?

HELBLE: No, I got very little guidance in that respect. I approached my job by reviewing the files containing the reports sent in by my predecessors. From my time in Saigon I was certainly familiar with the types of things that would be of general interest, whether in Saigon or in Washington. I will say that the Consulate, throughout the time that I was there, enjoyed something which was lost to it within a week after I left the post in 1964. That is, I had authority for direct communications with the Department of State in Washington. If I reported telegraphically, my reports would go to Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines, be relayed on to Washington, and “bounced back” to the Embassy in Saigon from Clark.

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In terms of substantive reporting, by and large, I did not do much reporting telegraphically in the early period of my tour in Hue because we had only the “One Time Pad” system of encryption. This system was terribly time consuming. However, if I were reporting telegraphically, I would report to both Washington and Saigon. As I learned and came to appreciate, it was to the advantage of the Consul, as will be made clear later, to have a “direct line” to Washington. Other than the Ambassador, nobody else had that arrangement. Some time later in the course of my three years in Hue it was rather important to have this arrangement from several points of view. As I said, that direct reporting channel was “lifted” as a prerogative of the Consul in Hue a week after I left Hue—as a direct result of things that I had done the week before.

Q: Did many people from the Embassy visit you up in Hue?

HELBLE: We had a steady stream of visitors. As I said, there were some tourist attractions in Hue. We had both official and unofficial visits from literally hundreds of people from the Embassy during the three years that we were in Hue. People from the Embassy in particular, but sometimes diplomats from other countries. I came to realize, when I was up in Hue, that while I looked forward to the opportunity to host some of the friends I had met in Saigon and have them come up and spend the weekend with us, for many of the people in Saigon it really didn't matter whether I was a friend of theirs or even knew them. They would simply contact me and ask for my assistance in Hue. There was no real hotel in Hue. What had passed as the hotel in Hue had been taken over by the MAAG detachment.

Q: Military Assistance and Advisory Group.

HELBLE: Exactly. That was no longer available to tourists coming to Hue. So each of us in the official American community tended to host visitors from Saigon on a regular basis, just about every weekend, or certainly a majority of weekends. The visitors might be a single person, a couple, a family, or whatever.

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Q: Was this primarily recreational travel, or was it really official business?

HELBLE: I'm restricting myself to tourist visits. The USIS fellow would tend to host his USIA colleagues, and the USOM people, their own people, although sometimes I would end up with some of the "other agency" people. It was a steady "drum beat" of visitors which, after a while, became a considerable burden. In most cases I simply had to offer our house, which was fairly large, as a place for them to stay and give them a consular vehicle and driver to take them to the Imperial City of Hue or to the imperial tombs. However, on the other hand, we were very isolated in terms of social contacts with other Americans outside of our little community. So there were always new perspectives and things to learn from our visitors. It never became so burdensome that we were really "annoyed" about it.

On the official side, visits also expanded. The military detachment would take care of their military visitors. It grew in size as the years wore on because of the expansion of U. S. programs and activities throughout the area. We had a wide range of official visitors coming. In 1963 and 1964 I had people coming from the NSC [National Security Council] in Washington, as well as from other Washington agencies. There was any number of visitors.

Q: Did they have any real "business" there, or were they just "slumming," as it were?

HELBLE: Well, of course, you would run into situations where people just wanted to say that they had visited Hue or had come for a meeting with the Rector of the University of Hue. That took a couple of hours. Then they would want to spend the next day and a half touring Hue, and so on. That's an understandable phenomenon, and we've all seen that.

Q: The Rector of the University, as I recall, was Father Luan. I remember meeting him once—I think that it was before you went up to Hue. I'd gone up there on a visit. He was

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telling me about the delights of eating “dog.” He said that yellow dogs are the best dogs to eat. I never really followed up on this.

In Saigon there were Vietnamese restaurants which specialized in serving dog meat. They never used to say what it was. They would advertise “Mon An Dac Biet,” or “special dish.” That meant dog, and all the Vietnamese knew this. A lot of Vietnamese didn't want to eat dog, but there it was.

HELBLE: Of course, Father Luan—Cao van Luan was his full name—was a legend in his own time and a very interesting character.

Q: He was a Jesuit priest, as I recall.

HELBLE: Yes. He was born in North Vietnam and had been trained for the priesthood there. Of course, North Vietnam is more the venue for dog eaters than South Vietnam. There was a lot of North Vietnamese influence in Hue. Father Luan certainly advanced the cause of serving dog to American guests!

Q: Did he tell them in advance?

HELBLE: On a number of occasions, when an American visitor was being hosted for dinner by Father Luan, I had occasion to be present. Of course, I was well aware of what the entree was likely to be. I certainly wasn't going to be the one to tell the American visitor. However, Father Luan took some sort of perverse delight in allowing the visitor to finish the entire meal. If the visitor made the mistake of saying, “Father, that was a delicious dish. What was that?” Then Father Luan would slyly smile and say, “Dog.” The visitor sometimes didn't catch what he said the first time or couldn't believe it. In any event, on several occasions I saw the visitor from Saigon or directly from the U. S. leave the table immediately and go out on the front porch. There were certain sounds which suggested that he'd had enough dog—and maybe a little bit too much. Yes, that was a local curiosity.

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I didn't mind eating dog. It's not something I would have ordered myself in a restaurant. I lost four pet dogs during the first six or eight months that I was in Hue.

Q: Were they yellow dogs?

HELBLE: They were all yellow dogs. But there was one other refinement, if I might say so. Dogs with black, speckled tongues were considered better to eat than dogs with pink tongues.

Q: I never heard that.

HELBLE: If there were a few black speckles on that tongue, it was going to be better to eat than dogs with pink tongues.

Q: Well, as you said earlier on, there was so much about Vietnamese society that we knew very little about. I always thought that a lot of it had to do with the language. I had my own problems with Vietnamese and never was able to speak it well. I think that you were a lot more fluent, because you were exposed to it a lot more.

HELBLE: I had the opportunity, indeed the requirement, to speak Vietnamese.

Q: I spent a week up in Hue in 1961. Tom Barnes had left, and it was before you went up there. I paid some calls, just going through the motions. I called on the Province Chief and so on, doing as well as I could in Vietnamese. The Province Chief said, "Oh, you have a good foundation in Vietnamese. You ought to stay up here longer and work on it." Well, that was not the way it was going to be, but I think that it was important to have the opportunity to speak Vietnamese. I'm glad that you had it.

In the larger sense there were only a few people in our Embassy in Vietnam, over the years, whose Vietnamese was adequate to conduct any serious discussion. One was John Negroponte, now Ambassador to Mexico; Dave Lambertson, just retired after serving

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as Ambassador to Thailand; Dave Engel, perhaps the best of our interpreters; Spence Richardson later on; and Hal Colebaugh, also.

HELBLE: That's right. There were some later on. From our generation of language officers we suffered from an inadequate course. I was the only one who was really thrust into a situation where I had to use Vietnamese. My grounding in Vietnamese, plus my lack of a high aptitude for languages, limited my ability in the language, but I had a functional knowledge of it.

Q: You mentioned a knowledge of Vietnamese culture. I thought that Hal Colebaugh was certainly the most impressive in this respect. I think that he not only could speak Vietnamese very well, but he really liked Vietnam. He liked participating in this culture—and he did, in a very broad sense. He was quite unique in this respect. However, as it happened, he did not stay on long in the Foreign Service.

HELBLE: You mentioned Tom Barnes. When I arrived in Hue—I'm not quite sure of when you went up there—Tom Barnes was still there.

Q: That's right. I went up to Hue in about April, 1961. You had not yet arrived.

HELBLE: I came up in May, 1961. Tom immediately took me on a five day trip through the consular district, which was an excellent introduction to it. This schedule was a little bit "heavy" for me. I hadn't done a long day's drive down the dusty roads of Vietnam, traveling in the June heat from one village conversation to the next one, to the next province chief, etc. It was certainly a good exposure. The only fault I found with the trip is that we took the "improved" Route 9, which was then still under construction from Qui Nhon up to Kontum. In the normal way you took Route 9 to Pleiku and then went directly North from Pleiku to Kontum. When we got to the top of a mountain going up onto the High Plateau of Central Vietnam, Tom said, "There's a road here called Route 9B. It's a short cut to Kontum."

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Of course, I didn't know anything about the area. So we took the "short cut," which was little more than a mud track. We went along on that. We stopped at a Montagnard community after about a half hour. We met a very informative French priest who had been living with the montagnards for many years up there. We reviewed the security situation with him, the VC [Viet Cong, or communist] presence, and so forth. From the description that the French priest gave, it sounded to me as if there were a fair amount of VC activity in the area. We continued on the mud track. There was no other sign of "civilization" in evidence on this dirt trail winding through the mountains and forest. The track was very, very isolated.

We arrived after dark in Kontum and went to the MAAG detachment to spend the night. We joined the MAAG people at the bar. They had already had dinner by that time. Of course, I had no idea where I was or what was going on. Anyway, they asked us why we were coming in from Pleiku so late. I said, "Well, we didn't come in from Pleiku. We took Route 9B to Kontum." Total silence descended on the MAAG officers at the bar. One of them said, "You did WHAT? Nobody's been down that track for years. It's totally insecure." [Laughter] Anyway, that was my introduction to Tom Barnes.

Q: That was Tom Barnes, all right. I've mentioned Hal Colebaugh as being well acquainted with Vietnamese culture. I think that Tom Barnes probably spoke good Vietnamese. He also had learned a good deal about Vietnamese culture. He ultimately married a Vietnamese woman. So those two Foreign Service Officers went further into this area. You may remember another translator or interpreter, Paul Vogle...

HELBLE: He was an American I failed to mention. He served as an adviser to the University of Hue.

Q: But generally speaking, your earlier point was absolutely correct. We just never, as a nation, had any very good appreciation of what Vietnamese culture was or how it would

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function under critical conditions. This greatly limited our ability to help the Republic of Vietnam to defend itself. This is really what it came down to.

HELBLE: One of the only cautionary notes that I received, when I went to Hue, was some advice that I received from Ambassador Durbrow or Political Counselor Mendenhall—I don't recall which one it was. They told me of several incidents that had led them to summon Tom Barnes down from Hue while he was acting as Consul. In effect, they “chewed him out” for having done things that were totally inappropriate in the Embassy's view. They cautioned me not to emulate my predecessor in that regard. One of the things that Barnes had done was to go to the center of the bridge that connected North and South Vietnam in the center of the DMZ [Demilitarized Zone]. Under the terms of the Geneva Accords of 1954 we were not allowed to go into the DMZ, much less go as far as the center of the bridge in full view of the North Vietnamese guards on the other side.

The other thing that he was criticized for was that there was a report that he had gone into Laos. He reportedly took the road from Quang Tri South of the DMZ, in the narrow, coastal plain area, west to the Laotian border, roughly paralleling the DMZ, and up into the mountains.

Q: This road would have been about 20 miles South of the DMZ.

HELBLE: Yes, probably a little less than that. He went past the outpost of Khe Sanh, which gained considerable notoriety later on, in the mid 1960's, when U. S. Marines were posted there and fought a long, bloody battle to defend it. It gained notoriety during the French days as well. The Laotian border was a few kilometers past Khe Sanh. There was a small village at the border on the Vietnamese side, which I visited once. I never crossed the border, as Tom Barnes had done. He had gone well into Laos, which was outside his consular district. This was not a wise thing to do, as far as the Embassy was concerned.

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Q: Tom was always a "free wheeler." He always felt that he was the best judge of what he should do.

HELBLE: He had a judgment problem, in the minds of many people, including his supervisors in Saigon.

That was an introductory trip to the consular district which Tom Barnes took me on. He left a day or two after we returned to Hue, and we were on our own.

I've already said that we had a very spacious, French colonial style house, with a staff of four servants. The position of American Consul in Hue enjoyed considerable prestige in the community. That was pleasurable, of course. There was only minimal guidance and slight oversight from Saigon on what I was doing. This is not a bad situation, in many respects. Within the American community in Hue, small as it was, there was a lot of internal antipathy and hostility when I arrived. I was overwhelmed with a succession of confidential "gripes" presented to me by virtually every member of the community about somebody else or several other people. This was an unpleasant aspect of the situation. The USIS officer and the USIA officer assigned to the Vietnamese-American Association were fighting with each other over everything. Each of them sought my support in making decisions on their behalf. Q: I think that this is called a "turf battle."

HELBLE: Yes. The USOM nurse "hated" the colonel in charge of the MAAG detachment. The MAAG colonel didn't get along with the CIA fellow, who, in turn, wasn't much liked by other people in the community. And so it went. It was a small post, and the environment was conducive to having these conflicts develop. It required a fair amount of my time and effort to try to keep it under control. Ultimately, I concluded that I would never be able to resolve these things which, by then, were deeply ingrained. However, people "move on" to other posts, and that's an advantage in the Foreign Service. They would be reassigned and then, one by one, the problems would disappear.

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Q: I've been in places which were quite small. I was assigned as Vice Consul in the Consulate in Surabaya, Indonesia. We got along very well. Then we all left, more or less at the same time, and were replaced by people who didn't get along at all. They fought about everything. It was ridiculous. I realized then how lucky we had been, in that we had been able to get along. It was instinctive. There was never any serious argument.

HELBLE: The situation in the American community in Hue was just the opposite. It started very poorly and then deteriorated. However, it was much better after a year or so, when a couple of the people were reassigned elsewhere.

Q: We were talking about the reporting which you did from Hue. I take it that you more or less identified your own reporting requirements, as you had done, in a way, in Puerto La Cruz.

HELBLE: Right. But at least by now I had some background in proper reporting and standards that were acceptable to Washington.

Q: Did you have professional courier service to the Consulate?

HELBLE: There was a regular military supply flight to Hue using a U. S. military cargo plane C-47. It brought to us and to others in the official American community, including the MAAG detachment, food and other products from the MAAG PX and Commissary in Saigon and Cholon. The diplomatic pouch traveled on that flight.

Q: I was wondering to what extent you were able to follow how the Embassy was reporting various aspects of the whole situation.

HELBLE: That was very difficult, because I did not receive copies of telegrams, at least electronically. I did not receive copies of the bulk of the reporting from the Embassy in Saigon.

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Q: Even despatch and pouch reporting?

HELBLE: Sometimes, I would get a copy of some of the reporting. I certainly didn't spend much of my time reading Saigon reports, because there wasn't much to read, as I remember. However, I knew that there was a lot being generated. From DCM Francis Cunningham and then from his successor, Bill Trueheart, I would get periodic letters, perhaps once every three or four weeks, in which there would be some comment—perhaps on something which I had reported. There might be some information of a background nature that they thought I should be aware of regarding things going on in Saigon. Once in a while there would be a request for follow-up reporting on something which I had heard and reported. Or I would be asked to keep an eye on a given Vietnamese Government program. That was more on an occasional basis than as a matter of routine.

Q: In this context didn't this situation change with the onset of the "Buddhist crisis"?

HELBLE: Well, I'd like to divide my experiences in Hue into two, chronological segments. I might call them "Hue 1," which was the 15 months that I was in Hue from my arrival in May, 1961, until home leave, in September, 1962. Then I would like to describe "Hue 2," which covered the period from January, 1963, until my departure from the post in early July, 1964.

During the first 15 months of "Hue 1" I developed pretty much of a routine. I traveled about 50% of the time—and that was true of most of the time I was in Hue. I would be in Hue for a week and then out of Hue for a week. Or I might take a shorter trip of three days or so, just going to Quang Nam and maybe Quang Ngai provinces. Visiting Quang Tri province would be, generally speaking, a one-day trip, because it was only a couple of hours away from Hue. As I recall, the city of Hue was 50 kilometers South of the DMZ. Quang Tri city was just a few kilometers South of the DMZ. So driving up to Quang Tri took a little over an

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hour. Generally speaking, Quang Tri was the least interesting of the seven provinces in the consular district and the least troublesome in terms of the time devoted to it.

When I traveled South of Hue, I might just have to go to Da Nang [capital of Quang Nam province] for a day. That would require an overnight trip. It was about a two and one-half hour drive to Da Nang. While occasionally I handled a trip to Da Nang on a one-day basis, it was generally worthwhile if I spent a little more time in Quang Nam province. Da Nang was the headquarters of the ARVN I Corps. There was a more sizable American military detachment there. The ARVN I Corps was responsible for everything from Quang Tri through Quang Ngai province. The ARVN II Corps was responsible for the two highland provinces of Kontum and Pleiku, which I mentioned, as well as Binh Dinh province with its capital in the town of Qui Nhon. II Corps Headquarters were in the town of Pleiku. So Pleiku and Da Nang were important stops for me as I monitored and reported on the security situation and shared some of the things which I had learned with the U. S. military advisers and other people. The bulk of the information "flow" was the other way. The U. S. military people were sharing with me information which they had available, not all of which was being reported through their channels. They did not always look at political information from the same viewpoint that a political officer would consider it.

As I say, travel was essentially a 50% component of my time. The travel was by Willys jeep...

Q: If you were going to Da Nang, would you go by yourself?

HELBLE: I did it both ways. I had a driver. On very long trips, when I was going down to Qui Nhon or up to the Central Vietnam highlands, I would take the driver. If I were just going to Quang Nam or a little bit South of there, I might go by myself.

Q: Did you take Route 1, which was reasonably well traveled?

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HELBLE: I took Route 1, which was a somewhat narrow, paved road. You had to compete with ARVN 2 1/2 ton trucks, which considered the two lanes of the road an artificial barrier which should not impede an ARVN truck. So if you were stuck behind one of those or encountered one coming toward you in the middle of the road, you took the position that you kept out of their way if you wanted to see another sunrise. Of course, there was a large number of narrow, "Bailey" type bridges, the old World War II steel frame and wooden surface bridge, which was easy to assemble. Those bridges were all "one way," so you had to know where your bridges were. There was usually a steep climb up onto the surface of the bridge from the roadway, and the same thing going down.

Q: So you needed to know what was coming from the other direction.

HELBLE: That's right. There were other driving hazards. One day I was driving from Qui Nhon to Quang Ngai. It was late afternoon, and I was in southern Quang Ngai province.

This was a province which, at the time of the signature of the Geneva Accords in 1954, had a residual group of about 40,000 Viet Cong left behind who stayed in Quang Ngai. It had been a stronghold of the "Viet Minh" during the Indochina War against the French. It remained so after the French left as a stronghold of the Viet Cong opposing the Vietnamese Government. Security in Quang Ngai province was always a question. That figure of 40,000 Viet Cong, as I understood it, represented about half of all of the Viet Cong who remained active in South Vietnam after the French departed. It was really a "hot spot."

Q: Remind me of this. Where was My Lai village?

HELBLE: It was in Quang Nam province. I was never in My Lai to my knowledge but I went to so many villages that I don't recall all of their names.

On this occasion I was on my way up from Qui Nhon to Quang Nam. It was late afternoon. I was traveling with my driver, but I was doing the driving. I had assumed, after several

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years of experience, one of the “defensive” measures available to me from the point of view of security out on the highway was to travel fast. So I was traveling fast when I came to one of the Bailey bridges in southern Quang Ngai. I deliberately went up on the bridge at a considerable speed. Just as I went down on the far side of the bridge, I heard a loud noise. I looked back in the mirror, and the Bailey bridge was disappearing in pieces flying in different directions behind me. I had gotten off the bridge by the time...

Q: Wow! By the time the bomb went off.

HELBLE: I was saved by the fact that this was an electronically detonated or “command detonated” mine...

Q: But the VC cadre didn't hit the switch in time.

HELBLE: It had not been a “contact” or “pressure” mine. My speed threw his timing off just enough so that I escaped. But that was life, traveling through Central Vietnam. It was the only time that I encountered a bridge explosion of that kind. Now, where was I?

Q: You were talking about the “bridge” problem, but...

HELBLE: You wanted to know where I spent the night. I stayed at a variety of places. In several places there would be a missionary whom I knew well, and he would put me up. Occasionally, a province chief would offer me his guest quarters. I stayed in virtually every kind of “flea bag” hotel that existed. Quang Ngai city, for example, was a “disaster area” in terms of hotels. In fact, the very night after the bridge incident I didn't get into Quang Ngai city until 6:00 PM. Because a number of traveling salesmen “worked” the Route 1 corridor, the “best” hotel, which I would normally have stayed in, was filled up. The next best hotel, which I had used on occasion, was also filled up. It wasn't as good as the “Number 1” hotel. I had run out of known options, so I inquired around and was given the name of a “hotel” which had three or four rooms. That was fully occupied, as was the “Number 4” hotel. I finally got to the “Number 5” hotel, which was as bad a place as I can ever recall

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having stayed in. For one thing, there was no mosquito netting and no mattress. The room was a little cubicle which had about a 5' high, lightly built, plywood divider between it and other such cubicles. The bathroom facilities, for all intents and purposes, were nonexistent. However, I was tired after a long, hot day out on the road. I learned how to find a shower, or something resembling that. These arrangements were something I could survive for the night.

At other times I stayed at the MAAG detachment. In Kontum, for example...

Q: Wasn't the MAAG detachment in Kontum in a former hunting lodge of Emperor Bao Dai—or was that the MAAG detachment in Pleiku?

HELBLE: I believe that was in Pleiku. I recall...

Q: Jim Montgomery and I stayed at one of them. In conversation between the two of us Montgomery referred to the ARVN guard there as Tran Hung Dao, one of the great soldiers of Vietnamese history. It was a beautiful lodge, as I recall it, and quite comfortable. But you think that that was in Pleiku.

HELBLE: Yes. I know that the MAAG detachment headquarters in Kontum was not a luxurious place.

As a security measure I never deliberately gave my schedule to anybody in advance. I would just arrive in a place and then “make do” with whatever I could locate. I did not want anybody to know when I was coming or when I was going.

The road trips were fascinating. I would remember when I saw something new. I would stop my vehicle and talk to a farmer working in the paddy fields. Sometimes, I would stroll over and talk to him—not that he had any great insights to offer, but every once in a while he would give me a little clue on security conditions in that particular village or area. Or he might make some comment about the strategic hamlet program in his village. As I

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say, I would usually call on the province chief and perhaps a couple of other government officials. When I would go into a town which was the headquarters of a District, I would stop and see whether the District Chief was there and talk to him, if possible. I'd go into a village and ask who was the head of the village, in other words, the village chief. If I could find him, I would talk to him. Sometimes, he would call in his Village Council members, and we'd have a real conversation.

Q: Did you encounter any hostility?

HELBLE: A lot of times there would be consternation. The people I met would be thinking, "What's this 'pale face' doing, running around the country by himself?" However, generally speaking, the receptions were warm, as was the beer and orange soda that they served me. You never found ice in these villages. Their favorite drink for service to visitors was a bottle of "Ba Muoi Ba" or "33" beer or a glass of highly carbonated orange soda. You could mix the two and get a nice, warm drink. On the other hand, I was inevitably thirsty by the time I would reach a village, so I learned to adjust to something less than my usual drink.

Sometimes, when I would call on a province chief, I would mention to him that, after calling on him, I was going to drive out to such and such a district, frequently in the foothills of the Annamite Chain of mountains. I wasn't trying to be secretive about my movements, because that was hopeless, anyway. If I went to a place, he was bound to learn of it. If this was Quang Ngai or Qui Nhon province, the province chief might say, "Well, if you're going out to such a district, let me send a truck load of my Civil Guards along with you. That's a rather bad area." I never declined such an offer of someone to go with me. I never asked for an escort but I didn't want to decline because I thought that if he thought that...

Q: He didn't want to have any "trouble" with your visit there. That was a sensible precaution.

HELBLE: That's right.

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Q: You mentioned “33” beer. I think that the beer brewery must have been partly owned by the French. You know, you can get “33” beer in the U. S. It’s called “Rolling Rock” beer. If you look at the rear side of the label, through the glass of the bottle, you can see the same “33” sign there. HELBLE: Really!

Q: Yes. Have a look for that. Our daughter Celia, who is an analyst at CIA, made a copy of an UNCLASSIFIED trip report which somebody had recently made in Vietnam. This was someone who had been there about the time that we were there. He said that “33” beer is still available. It is now called “333” beer. It’s the same otherwise—and probably using the same facilities.

HELBLE: After completing such a trip, I would write a trip report on whatever I thought was of interest and value. I routinely did consular district security reports on a quarterly basis. These reports considered the security situation in all of the provinces in the consular district. Prior to writing that report, I would make sure that I had covered all of the ground mentioned in it during the previous week or two.

In addition to traveling by road I traveled by helicopter when U. S. helicopters became more available. I never had any problem getting access to a helicopter. Ultimately, in about 1962 or 1963, CIA had a small, contract fleet of what they called “helio-couriers.” These were small, two passenger, single engine planes which had very short takeoff and landing VSTOL capability. Whenever I needed to use one, I had the opportunity to schedule one of them whenever I wanted to go from Hue to Kontum or Pleiku directly.

Q: They were pretty fast?

HELBLE: That’s right. Some of those flights were “exciting,” I might say. One day we were landing in Quang Ngai on a dirt strip. There was no control tower. The pilots of these aircraft were Turkish. They had come out on the wrong side of a coup d’etat in 1960 in Turkey and had to leave the country. The CIA employed them as pilots. They had been

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flying F-80's or F-101's in Turkey. They were rather “sporty” in their “aerobatics,” which I found interesting as a young man, if not always comfortable. On this occasion we were just touching down. We both saw just ahead of us a C-123 transport aircraft landing in the opposite direction. Of course, a C-123 has a very high tail. The Turkish pilot reacted immediately because, as this was a short strip, the two aircraft were “closing” on each other very fast. It was clear that the C-123 couldn't move much, let alone whether it could move at all. My pilot turned the “wheel” in the “right” direction, and we veered past the C-123's vertical stabilizer with I don't know how many feet of clearance. Certainly there were just a few feet of clearance between our wingtip and the tail of the C-123.

On another occasion we got lost, flying out of Da Nang, in Quang Nam province, to Kontum. The weather was very bad. Shortly after our departure from Da Nang we were flying over mountains. We didn't really know where we were. The pilot finally had to acknowledge this to me. He handed me a road map of the area of Central Vietnam! He said, “I'm going to go down. We've got to find a road.”

Q: That's how he navigated.

HELBLE: Yeah, that's right. He said, “And then we'll follow that road.” He put the plane in a tight, descending spiral, not knowing whether we were descending on the top of a mountain or into a valley. I thought that this was certainly “curtains” for us. I didn't think that there was a chance of getting out of this—going down into those mountains. Well, we got down to a point where, every once in a while, we were very close to the ground. The clouds would part just enough to let us see the ground. It was all just mountainous terrain down there—unpopulated. The pilot just kept going down in this same spiral, in the hope we were in some kind of open area...

Q: Or that you were going down into a valley.

HELBLE: Ultimately, we spotted a mountainside not far off the starboard wingtip.

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Q: How far off? 20-30 feet?

HELBLE: We couldn't see because it was largely cloudy and it was raining. Certainly, the ground didn't look as if it was very far away. That's all I can say. We finally got down under the cloud cover and in the rain. We could see where the mountains went up until they were buried in the clouds. We worked our way along and, sure enough, we found a road. It was the only road anywhere in the area, so we knew that this had to be the road we were looking for. We had the compass, so we took a southwesterly course and flew along that road. Every once in a while a gap in the mountains would appear. Because of the clouds, at times we didn't see these gaps with much warning. However, we continued to work our way through the gaps into an area of flat terrain. We were then able to follow the road into Kontum city.

Travel by air was terribly convenient, and sometimes quite “exciting.” Sometimes I would come back from a trip on one of those “helio-couriers” and land in Hue on that small landing strip within the Imperial City, which is only a couple of miles from my house. Since I never knew when I was coming back, if it was late afternoon on Friday and the Consulate was still open, I would ask the Turkish pilot to “buzz” the Consulate. My driver was used to this signal and would jump in the Consulate vehicle and go over and pick us up. However, if the Consulate was closed, then I'd ask the pilot to “buzz” my house, which was a block away from the Consulate. In that case my wife would jump in the car and come and pick us up.

Q: You didn't have a cellular telephone.

HELBLE: No. Air travel was another mode of transportation. During the 1963-1964 period I used air travel increasingly, because I'd done so much road travel and because security conditions were getting worse and worse. My time was constrained because of the events of 1963 and 1964 that we'll get into. So I did more and more travel by air.

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Q: Let's break at this point. We'll pick this up to cover the latter period when you were in Hue.

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HELBLE: On the subject of security I should say that the episode that I mentioned, the explosion of a bridge just after I crossed it, was not the only unfortunate encounter that I had on the highways and byways of Central Vietnam. The first incident occurred about six weeks after I had arrived in Hue. I was traveling with two of the U. S. military advisory officers and an enlisted man, going from Quang Tri city west toward Khe Sanh in western Quang Tri province. We were well into the "bush" area of the hills and came around a corner and saw three men in ragged clothing, walking along the road, each carrying a rifle of some sort. As you will hear later, these were evidently pretty old rifles. As soon as they saw us, they jumped into the "bush." We sped by the point where they had disappeared from sight, and nothing happened. On the way back, several hours later, the U. S. Army major with whom I was traveling handed me his .45 cal. automatic as we left the Khe Sanh region. He said, "John, if there's any trouble, just shoot this." I said, "But I've never fired a .45. I don't know how to handle it." He replied, "Well, here's the safety. Push that and then pull the trigger." I said, "Well, I understand that .45's are notoriously erratic and have a heavy 'kick' and so forth." He said, "Yeah, but it's not what you're going to hit. It's the noise that you're going to make. Maybe that will discourage them."

When we reached the same, general area, within a kilometer or so of where we had seen the three men earlier in the day, we saw the same three guys again. They jumped off the road, but this time we could hear some shots being fired at us. They were old rifles and weren't automatics. So I "engaged" the enemy. [Laughter] I fired out of the side of the open jeep with the .45 and plunked a few rounds into the bush. We relied more on the speed and the agility of the driver than on my marksmanship.

Q: But you'd fired the gun, though.

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HELBLER: Yes. It caused me to reconsider the option the Embassy had suggested to me. The Embassy Security Officer had asked me, before I went to Hue, whether I wanted a gun. I said, "No, why would I need a weapon? After all, I have a diplomatic passport." [Laughter] So after this episode in Quang Tri province, I thought, "Well, I guess that I do need a weapon." So I wrote to the Security Officer in the Embassy in Saigon. He shipped me a .38 cal. pistol which someone had left behind in Saigon, as well as some ammunition to fit it. I started carrying that.

Well, one day in Quang Ngai province I ran into an ambush on the road. I couldn't get by, so I jumped into the ditch by the side of the road. The ambush had been sprung on a small, Civil Guard unit, which was firing back. The Civil Guards were being attacked from both sides of the road by some Viet Cong. It was too late for me to turn around, and it was impossible to drive through the ambush site—or at least it didn't seem prudent to try. So I jumped out of the jeep with my trusty .38, joined the Civil Guards and, every once in a while, reached over the top of the ditch I was lying in and fired in the general direction of the enemy. However, I felt a certain sense of helplessness, not to mention uselessness under the circumstances.

When the fire fight ended and the VC unit, which may have consisted of only a few people off in the bush, drew off, I reconsidered my situation again. I told the CIA Vice Consul with whom I was serving about the incident when I got back to Hue. He said, "Well, I think that I can help you with that."

A couple of days later one of his colleagues came to the Consulate and gave me what was called a "Swedish K." This was a folding stock, paratroop type weapon, Swedish made, which fired 720 rounds a minute. He gave me several clips and extra ammunition for it. He said, "Let's go out to the firing range this weekend and we'll do a little practice with this." So we did, and I learned how to handle this weapon. I got so that I could take a tin can and, in the classic demonstration, throw it out 20 or 30 feet and then "bounce it along" with that kind of firepower. Of course, at a rate of fire of 720 rounds a minute, it doesn't take

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long for a clip to empty. So the question is really just how fast can you reload the clip. If I didn't become proficient with this weapon, I at least knew what I was dealing with and basically how to handle it.

From that point on, and this was probably about October or November, 1961, I carried that "Swedish K" with me just about every time that I went out on the road. I kept it close by me in the vehicle. It usefully served its purpose on a number of occasions. A couple of times I was totally alone. One time I was out on a very isolated stretch of Route 1 between Quang Ngai and Danang, in southern Quang Nam province—another area of considerable insecurity. I had a flat tire. It was fairly late in the afternoon. I got out to change the flat tire. Suddenly, a shot rang out, and a bullet hit the ground near me. My weapon was on the other side of the Willys jeep which I was driving. I had to run around and get the gun. When I came back up over the hood, and a couple of other rounds were fired in my direction, I fired a short burst with the "Swedish K" without knowing exactly where the enemy was. It was probably a single guy lying there, waiting to pick off a single person, who would be "easy pickings" for him. I certainly fell into that category, until I reappeared with the "Swedish K." After my short burst I waited patiently for a couple of minutes. Nothing else happened. I did not wait to change the tire. I hadn't gotten the punctured tire off yet. I got into the jeep and drove on for about a mile before I stopped again to change the tire.

In one fashion or another I had several parallels to that event. The "Swedish K" became more valuable to me than my diplomatic passport. [Laughter] That was life in the Foreign Service for a young officer. I didn't think a lot about it. I took sensible precautions that I could think of which still allowed me to do the job which I was there to do, which required a lot of travel.

Q: This reminds me of the story of David McMeans. Did you know him? He was in the Provincial Reporting Unit of the Political Section in Saigon with me in 1967-68. He was working in III Corps, North of Saigon.

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HELBLE: No.

Q: Every day he was going out into very "hairy" areas all alone. I thought, "First of all, nobody is really reading these reports." Every time someone would come out from Washington, I would say, "Do you really read these reports?" They would say, "Oh, they're very important." Then I would say, "But did you read it yourself?" They would say, "No." I was unable to find anybody who had actually read them! [Laughter] So I thought, "Here I am supposed to be watching out for those guys. I know that they're risking their lives every day, without asking me about it." I thought that this was a terrible business. McMeans made it even worse. He told me, "Oh, when I travel on such and such a stretch of road, I bring along this M-79, a grenade launcher." He said, "I have a couple of rounds and I fire them off as I drive along the road!" [Laughter]

HELBLE: I'll bet that there was a lot of cattle damage on that stretch of road!

Q: It's a serious problem, and I hope we never get involved in an insurgency of this kind again. I think that there is a real question as to whether what you're going to get in the way of worthwhile information is worth the risk that you run. I think that the answer is, "Probably not." I've taken risks that I should not have taken. I think about them occasionally and I think that I can't justify the risks that I ran. I've never told my wife about them. You may not have mentioned these episodes to your Joan.

HELBLE: Well, my Joan would occasionally catch me on Friday afternoon or Friday evening, when I'd come back from a trip, reloading clips for my "Swedish K" in the bedroom. She knew that if I was reloading clips, that meant that I had fired the gun during the trip.

I once was involved in an incident in Kontum. About a month later a MAAG guy from Kontum came by my house and said in my livingroom, with Joan present, "Oh, I understand you had a real 'dust-up' during your last trip up there." Joan would say, "What's

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this?" However, there was no need to go into details. She was a real "trooper." She knew that every time that I went out on the road I was in jeopardy. But she never said anything about it at the time.

Did you know a Foreign Service Officer who later was an Ambassador but was a POW Prisoner of War for five years in Hanoi.

Q: You mean Phil Manhard?

HELBLE: Yes.

Q: Did you know that Phil Manhard was captured by the communists in your house in Hue?

HELBLE: I was going to mention that.

Q: Go ahead. I'm telling your story, but you were living in what was going to be "my" house in Hue, and I really felt that. As soon as I saw the report of his capture, I thought, "Where was he hiding?" He was hiding under the stairs. But it's your story.

HELBLE: That's correct. We were blessed, however, living in Hue, because Hue was basically very quiet. In terms of the security threat, the back of the house was adjacent to a wide stretch of paddy fields which extended to Route 1 on the South edge of town. Periodically, there would be fire fights at a Police guard post on Route 1 in that area. Those would be very audible and sometimes even visible to us at night from our livingroom. Sometimes there would be sabotage of a bridge on Route 1 or a mortar attack on nearby facilities, and we could hear all of that going on. Essentially, we felt pretty secure. Perhaps not justifiably, but at least the city of Hue had virtually nothing in the way of incidents, during the time that we were there. So I was reassured that Joan was basically safe in Hue, whether I was there or not.

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On the other hand, just hearing gunfire periodically and being aware of the threat would not have been everybody's "cup of tea." To go back to a point earlier in this interview, Joan's background during World War II in the Philippines made her far more conscious, I think, of what could happen. However, perhaps she'd achieved a certain degree of equanimity and peace of mind, that "whatever was going to happen was going to happen." She never showed any sign that she was anxious to leave Hue or that she wanted me to "abort" this assignment at an earlier stage.

I came away from my experiences during "Hue 1," if you will, with a number of impressions.

The "Strategic Hamlet Program" was getting under way, but I thought that it was really an ill-conceived approach to the problem of security and a waste of resources. More importantly, as long as it was accorded policy and resource priority, it detracted from reaching any more logical, better conceived and potentially more effective type effort. There was such an effort which Ngo Dinh Can had initiated in Central Vietnam which I thought was conceptually a much better approach to the counterinsurgency effort. This program used small groups of ordinary people from the local area who had been particularly well-trained. They were lightly but well armed with weapons like the "Swedish K." These small groups consisted of 10 to 12 young men who would take up residence in a village in a threatened area, where the Viet Cong presence was known to be frequent. They lived with the villagers and worked with them during the daytime, assisting in their field work and small construction projects. In general, they tried to do things that would be useful for the village. At night they patrolled and worked the outskirts of the village. They did not just sit in the village but moved outside of it, trying to intercept any VC that were threatening the village.

I thought that the concept was much sounder than the relatively static strategic hamlets which had very artificial, security barriers. The strategic hamlets really did nothing significant to enhance the government's image with the people as a whole. Generally, the

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strategic hamlet program was more restrictive for the people. It denied them access to their fields because they were “stockaded in.” They would have to break up the stockades so that they could get to work in their fields. The whole purpose of the strategic hamlets was defeated by that simple act, if nothing else.

I thought that Ngo Dinh Can's “Forces Populaires,” as they were known, offered some hope, but it did not enjoy the policy or resource status that the strategic hamlet program did, nationwide. The “Forces Populaires” were limited to the immediate area of northern Central Vietnam, as Can tried to get this operation moving forward. This program was assisted by the CIA in terms of both training and arms. However, in my view it never really had a chance to prove itself because of the lack of national emphasis on it.

Q: This whole problem of “defended villages” is a difficult one. The British undertook resettlement of the population in Malaya to “defended areas.” The problem was easier in Malaya because the communists were much weaker in every respect. When the Soviets went into Afghanistan in 1979, I thought that this would really show what the communists can do to deal with guerrillas. I thought that they'd go into a village, kill all the men, rape all the women, and burn the village to the ground. Well, that's what they did in Afghanistan, and it didn't do them much good! I don't think that anybody really has a solution to this whole problem.

In Malaysia the reason that “resettlement” worked was that the British started off with the unflinching support of about half of the population—the Malays. The Malays weren't doing this to please the British. They were doing it to “save their own skins.”

HELBLE: And the threat was a Chinese ethnic communist movement.

Q: That's it! It was a palpable, observable threat. The Malays knew exactly what it was. They didn't have to be convinced. They were the source of the police forces, the irregulars, and all the rest of it—plus the Malays who joined the various battalions of the Federation Regiment and the Malay Regiment. And, of course, there were the British battalions to

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support them. The British went at the problem in a very different way. We were never the government in Vietnam. They WERE the government in Malaya. They could make the decisions. We could never do anything more than suggest.

HELBLE: That's right. You would get frustrated when nothing happened.

Q: *That's right.*

HELBLE: I want to set the background for one of the major, if not THE major episode during the "Hue 2" period. I would like to mention things that were evident but whose meaning was muted in evaluating the significance of the shreds of evidence available. There were indications of some increased tension and antipathy between the Catholic and the non-Catholic communities in Hue in particular and, to a lesser extent, elsewhere in Central Vietnam.

One of the first things I observed when I got up to Hue in the summer of 1961 was the dedication of a minor, Catholic basilica in Quang Tri province. This was a heavily advertised and promoted event. I heard, right from the outset, "grumbles" from some of the non-Catholics in Hue that it seemed that every cabinet minister and every key general had to come up for the dedication, whether they were Catholic or non-Catholic. Large resources had been put into the construction of the basilica, and great attention was being paid to it. That was probably the first thing I heard of a specific development which was aggravating some people. However, I didn't attach a great deal of significance to that, in isolation, at the time.

Much more enduring, in terms of sensitivities, and literally visible to me from my own house, was the construction of a large, new church. It was not a Cathedral, because there already was a Cathedral in Hue. This was a very, very large church. It was located on the other side of these paddy fields which I mentioned a few minutes ago. As a number of people pointed out to me, this large church was being constructed with bags of cement which had the U. S. "hand clasp" sign on it, with U. S.-provided Vietnamese Army trucks

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hauling things, and other supplies that were a reflection of U. S. aid to Vietnam. I felt that these supplies were being diverted from the purposes they had been intended to serve by the U. S. Government.

This put me in a somewhat awkward position, but I was not really the enforcer of the disposition of aid “goodies” in the countryside. Indeed, such activities were common in many different ways. You only had to go to the Central Market in Hue on any morning and see U. S. aid commodities which were being resold, in presumed violation of the rules for their disposition. There were real limits as to what you could be expected to do about such “diversion” of aid supplies, and so on. More acutely, in the longer term, political sense, these complaints were inevitably made by non-Catholics. You had this very visible symbol of the pro-Catholic orientation of President Diem; his brother, Archbishop Ngo Dinh Thuc; another brother, Ngo Dinh Can; and, I suppose, of his other brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, as well.

Nevertheless, these incidents were not “major flags,” at least to me, at that point in time. While I was aware of these “sensitivities” between the Catholic and non-Catholic communities, there did not seem to be a shred of Buddhist opposition emerging or being coordinated in any formal or informal sense. There was nothing very concrete to suggest the type of events that could and, in fact, did happen subsequently in Hue and elsewhere.

I mention this because there were things that I saw. I mentioned previously the mother of the four Ngo brothers, who lived in Hue. Each year, on her birthday, there would be a big celebration. President Diem, the Prime Minister at the time, cabinet ministers, and so on, would come up to Hue to celebrate it. The principal event was a very high profile Mass in the Cathedral, near where the Ngo brothers' mother lived. All of the local government officials were “required” to attend this Mass. I was also “expected” to attend. While this could be shrugged off as “obeisance” to the maternal element of the family, it was frequently interpreted as further evidence of the importance of Catholicism in what was

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basically a non-Catholic community. So there were complaints regarding the overtones of that religious issue, in the context of “mother's” birthday.

Overall, by the end of 1962, when I left Hue on home leave, it was obvious to me how “different” Central Vietnam was from southern Vietnam. The people, the economy, the culture, and the thought processes were different. There was a broader incidence of poverty, generally, in Central Vietnam. Life was more difficult for people in that area than in Southern Vietnam. Certainly, there was an absence of any political opposition of any sort, although I am not suggesting that there was a high degree of organized opposition to the Diem Government in Saigon. But in Saigon there were “dissident” elements which were somewhat more prominent and had relatively greater freedom to move about and do things than they would have had, if they had lived in Central Vietnam.

When I went to the Montagnard areas of the Central Vietnam highlands, it was frequently clear that the montagnards were not being “cultivated” in any meaningful manner by the government. It was equally clear that most of the montagnards were not in favor of the Viet Cong or the North Vietnamese. They basically wanted to be left alone. No significant number of montagnards were converted to the cause of the Viet Cong. However, it was very evident that the montagnards did not appreciate the very paltry efforts of the government on their behalf to improve their economic or social well-being. The montagnards' encounters with Vietnamese government soldiers generally led to unpleasantness from their point of view. So I did not have the feeling that the Government of the Republic of Vietnam was enhancing its status among the montagnards and advancing its cause in that particular area.

That generally brings me to the end of my comments on the “Hue 1” period. My next topic would not be to go directly into the “Hue 2” period but rather to give a little description of the brief home leave that I had in Washington in September, 1962. Do you have any other questions, Tom?

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Q: No, I think that this is coming along very nicely.

HELBLE: In late September or the first week of October, 1962, I arrived in Washington for one week of consultations prior to beginning three months of home leave.

I reported, as expected, to Ben Wood (Chalmers B. Wood), the Director of the Vietnam Working Group at that point. I talked with him and some members of his staff, as well as with a couple of officers from INR [Bureau of Intelligence Research]. Ben asked me to accompany him to the weekly staff meeting of the Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs, which was chaired by Governor Averell Harriman, the Assistant Secretary at the time. Ben said to me, "I want you to give just five minutes, not more than five minutes, on your observations in Hue, after two years in Vietnam, including a year in Hue." He said, "I'll introduce you to the Governor after the Deputy Assistant Secretaries and the other Country Directors have given their reports. But you must keep it limited to five minutes and you must speak very loudly, because the Governor has a severe hearing impairment and has a hearing aid."

So I attended the staff meeting and, for 45 minutes, the other people attending raised various issues. The Governor remarked on nothing that anybody said. Some of the Deputy Assistant Secretaries commented on their subordinates' work or asked questions.

After 45 minutes it was my turn. I was introduced and stood up, relatively close to where the Governor was sitting. I started my remarks. After about two minutes the Governor reached into his pocket, pulled out the earpiece of his hearing aid, and put it into his ear. I saw this and realized that I had been speaking louder than anybody else had done. Nobody else stood up and spoke right at him, as loud as I was speaking. Right there, I could only conclude that he hadn't heard a thing from his staff during the entire 45 minutes of the meeting up to that point. He may have been thinking, "Who is this guy whom I've never seen before?" Maybe he picked up a couple of words because of the volume at

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which I was speaking. He listened intently for the next couple of minutes. I stopped at the end of my allocated five minutes.

I asked if I could answer any questions, and the Governor had some questions. The long and the short of it was that the rest of the Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs senior staff had to sit there for 45 minutes more while the Governor asked me about Vietnam. I'm sure this bored them to tears, but the Governor seemed genuinely interested. At the end of the meeting I returned with Ben Woods to his office and was chatting with him. A few minutes later the phone rang. Governor Harriman was on the phone to Ben and said, "Ben, I want that young man that you brought to the staff meeting to go and see Roger Hilsman. I've just talked to him, and Roger will see him today if that is convenient to that young man." Roger Hilsman was then the Director of INR [Bureau of Intelligence Research].

So I went and talked to Roger Hilsman. We had about an hour's conversation. He was very interested. Then he said, "I'm going to call Walt Rostow." Rostow was then the head of Policy Planning in the Department of State. He said, "I want Walt to talk to you." So some time within the next day or so I was in Rostow's office. When I finished, Rostow said, "I want you to talk to Mike Forrestal." Mike Forrestal was then a Special Assistant to the President with responsibility for Vietnam. Rostow said, "I'm going to tell Mike that President Kennedy should see you." So I said, "OK, I'll stand by." So Forrestal called back shortly. We set up an appointment for the following day. He said, "I'll talk to you first, and then we're going in to see the President." He said, "It's going to be an 'off schedule' thing, and there will just be the three of us."

Now I was starting to take things seriously. I had no expectation of talking directly to the President of the United States in my entire career. Then I started getting nervous and wondered, "What am I going to say?" I told myself, "The only thing you can say is what you told the other people." In any event, I went over to the White House and was taken into Mike Forrestal's office. We spent an hour or so talking and were getting ready to go into the Oval Office of the President. Then Mike's phone rang. The President had had

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something else come up and had to cancel the meeting. So I was “saved.” I missed the opportunity of a lifetime.

It was a rather interesting home leave. I had had no reason to anticipate that it would involve appointments with officials at such high levels. It certainly conveyed to me that there was an interest in Vietnam. The only thing that I could figure out which attracted each of those very serious officials to hearing from me was that I was, at that point, the only Foreign Service Officer who was serving full-time outside of Saigon. I lived under very different circumstances, had drawn somewhat different conclusions, and was reporting somewhat differently than the reporting coming out of the Embassy in Saigon. Indeed, it was subsequently confirmed to me that there was a feeling that I was somebody who had been out in the countryside and saw a very different scene. Perhaps, more importantly, this scene was more important, in some respects, than the Saigon political scene. Whatever it was, it was treatment which I had never anticipated. It was educational to me.

I then went off on home leave, interrupted only by a couple of phone calls during the Cuban “Missile Crisis” of October, 1962. Somebody had learned that there was a Foreign Service Officer not otherwise assigned at this point who could speak Spanish. I was told that I was probably going to have to report back to Washington within 24 to 48 hours for duty on the Cuban Task Force. This did not please me at all. I very much needed a break from my first two years of intense activity in Vietnam. However, the second phone call 24 or 48 hours later told me what I already knew from television, essentially, that the crisis was over. I was told, “We won't need you.”

From there we'll just go into “Hue 2,” which started on or about January 4, 1963.

Upon my return to Hue, I relieved Jim Rosenthal, my capable “stand in.” He had “held the fort” in Hue for three months. I found that nothing very dramatic had happened during my absence from Hue. Nothing seemed fundamentally different. I had a new Vice Consul, Jerry Greiner, who had arrived in Hue just a few days before we did with his new bride,

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who had been an experienced White House correspondent for a women's magazine. They brought a new element of fresh blood and energy to the local scene.

The months of January, February, and March, 1963, were pretty much routine. Of course, I started traveling again right away. Nothing of any consequence came to my attention during that time, at least that I can recall.

April, 1963, brought a family tragedy. We had had a daughter born in Hue less than four months after we arrived there in September, 1961. Her name was Cindy Lee Helble. My wife, Joan, had stayed in Hue to have the baby, contrary to the practice of many American women in the "out stations" of Vietnam, who went to Saigon to have their babies. However, Joan preferred to stay in Hue. It had not been an "easy" birth, but it eventually was successful in all respects. In April, 1963, when the tragedy occurred, Cindy Lee was 18 months old. I had been gone on a road trip during the entire week when it happened. Prior to my departure I had requested our gardener at the consular residence to dig a small "duck pond." I had in mind getting some ducks for my son who, at the time, was six years old.

Q: This was Stuart.

HELBLE: This was Stuart.

Q: "Chau Stewart."

HELBLE: "Chau Stewart," in Vietnamese. Easter was coming the following weekend. So I left on my trip. When I returned late Friday afternoon, the gardener, Giam, was awaiting my arrival and proudly and immediately took me to the "duck pond" which he had dug and filled with water. I looked at it and immediately said, "No, Giam, it's too deep. It must be only about 18 inches deep." I gave him a hand signal to show how deep I wanted it. The loose dirt was on the side of the pond, and I said, "You must fill that in and make it just 18 inches deep instead of about three feet deep."

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Q: Was it lined with concrete or was it...

HELBLE: No, it just had an earthen bottom. There was no investment in it, other than his labor during some portion of that week. The next morning I went to the airport to greet the usual weekend visitors from Saigon. In this case the visitor was Gil Kinney, a Second Secretary in the Economic Section, I believe, a relatively younger officer, and his wife, Ann Kinney. From the airport I took them to stop at the home of Jim and Bernadette Asher, the USIA couple. The Asher's had replaced another USIA couple who had been in Hue earlier. The Kinneys knew the Ashers from a previous post. While I was at Asher's house, one of my household staff came over on his bicycle to this house, which was only a block away from my house. He told me that something very "bad" had happened to "Chau Cindy," our daughter. I jumped into the car, drove home, and found Cindy in the house on the floor. Joan was crying and said, "We found Cindy in the 'duck pond.'" I had had Boy Scout training in artificial respiration, and that's all that I knew how to do, except to make sure that the MAAG doctor had been called, which had been done. I applied artificial respiration far too late. It was obvious by the time that the doctor came that she was dead. So we lost our daughter under those tragic circumstances.

I mentioned earlier where we buried her and where her remains still are to this day, on the banks of the "Perfume" River Song Huong. Despite this very tragic experience, it did not raise any question in our mind as to whether we should leave Hue. It was just something that any parent who has lost a child knows is difficult to go through and to overcome. It is never totally overcome, but you just have to cope with it in your own, personal way. We did so as well as we could.

A month later, in May, 1963, I was seized with an abdominal pain. I had to be medically evacuated by helicopter to Nha Trang, on the coast in Central Vietnam, where there was a U. S. Army Field Hospital. That was on May 7, 1963. The pain was acute, but it turned out

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that the problem was minor. Once it was diagnosed, the treatment was simple, and I was released from the hospital on the following day.

I was able to obtain a flight back up to Da Nang. I had called the Consulate in Hue and asked them to send the Consulate car down to Da Nang to pick me up on the following morning. I spent the night of May 8 in Da Nang. Before I started early on the morning of May 9 to return to Hue, I was called by the Duty Officer at the I Corps U. S. Military Advisory Detachment and was told that a serious incident had occurred the previous day May 8, 1963 in Hue. Reportedly, at least several people were dead. I immediately returned to Hue by road and found all sorts of people waiting to see me at my home. I gathered whatever information I could on the incident, which was the spark which led in turn to the long and difficult series of events covering the spring, summer, and fall of 1963 in Vietnam.

In my view the essential facts of the matter were satisfactorily established fairly early on. By and large this is the view of these events in most books and articles written on the subject, although there were many different versions of the same events at an earlier stage. The facts, as I could best determine them, and which I still believe to be true, were that there was a demonstration by a group of Buddhists. Here I use the term "Buddhist" deliberately, yet advisedly, because in any large group of people on the streets of Hue or any other city there would be some Buddhists and some non-Catholics. However, many were not "Buddhists" in any strong, religious sense. It was a Buddhist organized demonstration which had approached the radio station demanding that a message be broadcast on the occasion of Buddha's birthday. The same group of Buddhists had previously been refused authorization to conduct a public celebration of Buddha's birthday. This refusal "annoyed" them, because they had always been able to celebrate Buddha's birthday in some public fashion. No one had ever taken political or other offense to such a celebration as far as I was aware or anybody could tell me. This was essentially another holiday type activity. For whatever reason they were refused permission to hold the public celebration of Buddha's birthday. So they wanted a message broadcast over the radio station in celebration of Buddha's birthday. Local security forces—not Army troops—

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including Civil Guard forces under the command of the Deputy Province Chief for Security, a Major Dang Sy, were informed of the demonstration and went to the radio station to prevent any outbreak of real trouble or violence. The arrival of the Civil Guard forces apparently precipitated growing unhappiness among the people gathered at the radio station. Somehow, somebody in a wheeled, armored personnel carrier of the Civil Guard force seems to have “panicked.” He reportedly drove through a part of the crowd, killing several people at least, under the wheels of the vehicle.

The government version immediately made public regarding what happened was that the Viet Cong had provoked this incident. This was a not uncommon example of the government's treatment of difficulties on the streets. It was always stated that it was the Viet Cong who inspired these things. I don't think that there was a shred of evidence to sustain that theory—and most people did not believe that version of events. The government alleged that somebody in the crowd threw a grenade toward the Civil Guard vehicle. To my knowledge, there were never any grenade fragments found at the scene. That story increasingly appeared to be untrue.

These allegations made by the government added to the sense of outrage felt by the people in Hue. Here I am speaking of the views of many Catholics as well as non-Catholics who were friends of mine and who were quite incensed at the behavior of the Civil Guard troops. But beyond the effect of the incident itself, the government's “cover up,” which was regarded as totally unbelievable by the people of Hue, only aggravated the government's position and jeopardized it even further. There was a feeling that there would never be any punishment of those responsible or an apology to the Buddhist community. During the succeeding days things went from bad to worse in terms of popular attitudes.

It seemed clear, even at that early stage and after the first week or so, that a “watershed” had been passed in terms of the government's position and stability. Reverberations from this event extended beyond the confines of Hue. Well, as history shows, they certainly did, in due time. There were several demonstrations in Hue—peaceful marches with

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banners—to protest what had happened. There was no violence. The speakers were carefully monitored by the authorities. A number of these speeches were authorized by the authorities to soften the criticism of the government. However, the banners were very critical of the government, which was an unheard of indication of opposition in Hue, during the years when Ngo dinh Can controlled the area.

In the Consulate we monitored these events as closely as we could. While I went to one of the first parades or demonstrations, I decided that it would be prudent not to go personally to other demonstrations. I was well known to the security forces and others in Hue.

I did not realize for several days that Jerry Greiner, my Vice Consul who worked for CIA, was attending these demonstrations. He had been a 6' 3" linebacker for the Los Angeles Rams, was a physical "brute" of a fellow, and would be terribly imposing in any crowd of Vietnamese, who averaged 5' 4" in height. In other words, he would "stand out" in such surroundings. I have a marvelous photo that one of my local employees took of him at one of these demonstrations. In the picture he is peering around a 4" thick, concrete lamp post. A 4" lamp post did not disguise much of Jerry Greiner! I saw that picture only after we had decided not to attend the demonstrations. Our USIS officer, Jim Asher, was 6' 3" tall; and we had the Public Safety Adviser from USOM, who was 6' 3". All of them were going down to watch the demonstrations. In a community such as Hue, where there were virtually no foreigners, they stood out like "very sore thumbs." So I called them all in and said, "From now on, we will cover these events with one of our local employees," whom I immediately showed how to use a simple, "Rolleiflex" camera. He would take shots of anything of interest but particularly of banners, as we wanted to know what the banners were saying. In other words we Americans would have a much less visible presence. Of course, the information was shared with the others. So we got our "giant" Americans off the street in that situation. It was an amusing sidelight, but this is something you really have to be sensitive to in such a political environment.

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Most of the attacks made orally and in the signs against the GVN were very indirect. However, they were made and were visible to the people of Hue, which made them very unusual. Of course, there was a lot of ferment on the scene.

There was immediate U. S. media attention to these events. After the initial incident there was no follow-on violence, and media attention naturally waned. A number of reporters for U. S. media came to Hue during the first 24 hours after the first incident, but within 72 hours, as I recall it, they had all gone away. A street parade wasn't a terribly newsworthy event, unless it ended in some confrontation and violence. That was not happening.

However, at least there was an awareness in the U. S. media of this incident and of the problem involved in it. I had "feedback" from the Embassy on the reporting that was being done in the U. S. on the subject.

Some of the demonstrations resulted in "sit downs" on a major thoroughfare on the southern side of the city of Hue, where the University of Hue and the two principal high schools, a boys' high school and a girls' high school, were located. Certainly, there were students involved in these activities. "Bonzes" - Buddhist monks - from the Tu Dam Pagoda, the central and most prestigious pagoda, participated in the demonstrations, gave speeches, and so on.

On several occasions the authorities tried to remove the demonstrators from their "sit downs" which blocked traffic. Tear gas was used. I think that the tear gas was reliably reported to have been "poured" on people's heads on some occasions, instead of being sprayed in a gaseous form. There were some reports that the tear gas supply of the police force in Hue was so outdated that it had deteriorated and could not be spread in the normal manner. I can't comment on that. I really don't know if that was true or not. I certainly had a number of reports from several of the doctors at the local hospital, whom I knew, regarding the casualties that they were treating. Some of those who required treatment had severe eye irritations or possible damage to the eyes, skin burns, and that

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sort of thing. As I recall it, there were no fatalities during those episodes. However, since so many of the demonstrators in the crowd were young people, their involvement further inflamed the attitudes of the local people.

Essentially, as I recall it, and this is without any recent review of the history, documentation, or books that pertain to this period, for several weeks or maybe as much as a month this situation festered and was of great concern. However, it had not yet exploded as the major political and international media issue that it became until the first “immolation” suicide by fire of a bonze in Saigon.

Q: That was the next, principal development. It received media attention. However awkwardly the government had been handling the matter up to this point, the issue was fading.

HELBLE: Yes. It had been restricted in its emotional impact essentially to Central Vietnam—primarily Hue and, secondarily, Da Nang. There were just minor demonstrations in several other, small towns in Central Vietnam—more in sympathy than anything else. These generated no sense of even local excitement in most cases.

It was when events led to Saigon that it became a truly national and critical issue. It was one which, I think, created many of the subsequent images and perceptions in the American mind. Americans saw images on television which depicted the situation in Vietnam as being chaotic. The country was depicted by the media as having an unpopular government, and it was stated that U. S. assistance was propping up this unpopular government. I think that it contributed, in a significant manner, to many of the perceptions that were widely accepted about Vietnam in subsequent years. The U. S. had a very unpopular government as an ally. Even when President Diem himself was overthrown, there were still images of mass confusion which persisted and undermined much of the political support in the United States eventually for our policies in Vietnam. All of these things flowed together and eventually caused a “tidal wave” of attitudes in this respect. The

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suicide by fire of the bonze was probably the first major impact on the American psyche. People saw bonzes burning...

Q: I think that there were about seven or eight such incidents of bonzes "immolating" themselves. These all happened in Saigon.

HELBLE: We had one in Hue. I cannot recall when it was—it may have been in late June or early July of 1963. However, the "immolation" in Hue didn't attract that much attention, once Saigon "got into the act."

Q: Then, of course, there were other problems that came up. There was a clear attempt by the Buddhist leaders to exploit the matter as much as they could. They were running more or less continuous agitation meetings outside of certain pagodas—especially Xa Loi Pagoda in Saigon. This kept the issue aflame, and the American press, I think, fanned it. There is no doubt that the GVN mishandled this issue in every way.

HELBLE: Of course, there was considerable concern among the official American community in Central Vietnam, flowing out of that incident. It was evident that there had been a considerable loss of public support for the government in that area. There was concern that the Viet Cong would exploit this opportunity. We kept waiting for signs of increased VC military activity in the surrounding area or the activities of "agents provocateurs" in Hue or Da Nang. However, I think that the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese were caught off guard by these events and were not in a position or were not prepared to strike in such a situation. It seemed plausible that that kind of activity could develop literally "overnight."

The security situation in the provinces continued to deteriorate, but at no greater a rate than in the past several years. We watched the security situation very closely, as we always did, but particularly in relation to the May 8, 1963, incident. Nothing really dramatic occurred in that respect. There was concern that the government was being distracted by these events, that there was dissidence within the military services, and that sort of thing.

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However, nothing really happened in that respect, in my view, certainly in Central Vietnam. Nothing happened that would indicate that “the worst” was occurring or that the conflict between the government and the communists was increasing in scale.

Because it was the venue for the May 8 incident, Hue was a more interesting place to live, in certain respects [Laughter] for succeeding months.

I had an unfortunate staff situation develop at that time. The American administrative assistant I had, George Clee, had been diagnosed by the American MAAG doctor as suffering from hepatitis, shortly before the May 8 event. This diagnosis was confirmed by the head doctor at the hospital of the University of Hue, as well as the head German doctor of the German aid team which was teaching Vietnamese medical students at the university. They confirmed the diagnosis and concurred that he would have to take life very easy for a while, as he recovered from this. He could still work a limited schedule, but certainly not in excess of six hours a day.

Well the events in Hue were driving us at a frenetic pace. George was a most dedicated and serious fellow. He and his lovely German wife lived in a house directly adjacent to the Consulate. George had been handling our classified, telegraphic communications. When I was traveling and out of the office, George had to handle whatever came up. It was really impossible to restrict him to six hours a day, no matter how much I ordered him. He just couldn't observe such a limit. I really had problems trying to enforce this limit. As a result, his physical condition continued to deteriorate throughout the month of May, 1963, following the incident. By early June I knew that we had to “medevac” him. I was in contact with the Embassy on this issue. The Embassy told me that they had no more travel funds for that fiscal year. On July 1, 1963, a new allocation of funds would be available, and I could then evacuate him!

Q: To suit everybody's convenience.

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HELBLER: Yes. In any event, the MAAG doctor said, "He just cannot wait. You've got to get him out of here. He isn't going to rest and isn't going to get the medical treatment that he needs. He's deteriorating rapidly." So I said to him, "George, you and Ingrid are leaving Hue on tomorrow morning's flight." He said, "But we don't have travel orders." I said, "There aren't going to be travel orders for this trip. We'll worry about that some other fiscal year." So I went to the Consulate's Petty Cash Fund and scraped up enough from it, bought two Air Vietnam tickets, took them to the airport the next morning, put them on board the plane, went back to the Consulate, called the Embassy Administrative Counselor, and told him that Air Vietnam Flight such and such was arriving at Tan Son Nhut airport in one hour and 45 minutes. George and Ingrid Clee were on board. George would probably need an ambulance to transport him to some sort of medical facility. However, in any event, in one hour and 45 minutes he would be in the hands of the Embassy's consular district.

Q: Who was the Administrative Counselor?

HELBLER: I cannot remember for certain, but I am fairly sure that it was Bill Bradford. In fact, Bradford may have been the GSO General Services Officer—I don't recall. I told him that George Clee was no longer in the Hue consular district. I subsequently sought and received reimbursement for the Petty Cash Fund.

It was a damned good thing that we got George out because he was in very serious condition. He was flown immediately to the hospital at Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines. He spent a substantial amount of time there being treated for hepatitis. He was eventually evacuated to the States and spent a total of one year undergoing hospital treatment, recovering from what turned out to be severe damage to his liver. His doctors told him that he just barely got to them in time.

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I've always thought of that as the worst example that I've encountered in the Foreign Service of a "no can do" administrative attitude. They were prepared to let a valued member of our team die because they could not muster \$200 in travel funds.

Q: This reminds me of a different situation, but the same mentality. This goes back about 10 years ago in Chicago in the winter. There had been terribly heavy snow, so much so that the City of Chicago had used up all of its allocation in the budget for snow removal. Then there was another heavy snow. The Mayor took off for Florida and said, "I'm sorry that we can't plow the streets because we don't have any money left!" He was promptly voted out of office at the next election.

HELBLE: The summer of 1963 continued, with the principal, political events occurring in Saigon. Maneuvers and efforts continued to be made, to the extent that they were genuine, to reach some accommodation between the government and the Buddhists. The Buddhists continued to capitalize on their new-found fame and attention from the media and, I might say, from the Consulate and Embassy staffs as well. After all, I had gone off to see Thich Tri Quang, the chief leader or instigator of the Buddhist movement, once it emerged as some sort of political movement. I talked to him, and Embassy Political Officers went off to talk to the key "bonzes" in the Saigon pagodas. This function was part of their duties, and I don't want to appear to be criticizing them in this regard. However, the point is that the Buddhists had found a number of sympathetic audiences, including that particular one, and tried to promote their cause through them.

I might say that a telegram which I wrote on the interview with Thich Tri Quang has been publicly released and quoted in more than one book. A book which I have in my library cites the essence of my conversation with Tri Quang. I had to arrange the appointment with him clandestinely, although it was to be at his pagoda and was in his private cell. In setting up the appointment I could not call him directly. I had to work through an intermediary who was "close" to Tu Dam Pagoda to set up the meeting. I knew that my telephone lines were being monitored by the Vietnamese authorities. I was able to observe

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that I was fairly frequently under “surveillance.” My house and the Consulate were under surveillance. This was prior to the subsequent August 21, 1963, “crack down” by the government on the Buddhists, to which we will shortly refer.

I called on Tri Quang. Just the two of us were present. It was very difficult to extract from him any useful information on what his objectives were, what his intentions might be, and what his feelings were about the government's handling of the situation. It was clear that he was critical of the government. When I asked him whether he thought that there would be more “trouble” in the weeks and months ahead, he gazed out of his little, monk-like cell, which was probably about eight feet long and five feet wide, and had a cot in it...

Q: Just like our Vietnamese language classroom at the FSI!

HELBLE: Yes. A single chair had been brought in for me to sit on. He sat on his cot. The small window looking outside had bars on it. I felt that I was more in a prison cell than in somebody's bedroom. In any event, he looked out his window, when I asked about future “trouble.” It was basically a sunny day, but with some white clouds in the sky and a little breeze blowing. He said, “Well, the sky is blue, but the clouds are drifting by.” That was about the extent of his answer on that particular subject. It was not uncommon to receive an answer of that sort. I will say that the book to which I just referred quotes that line, but more for the sake of demonstrating how little American officials understood Buddhist culture. However, the author of the book does not go on to explain what Tri Quang meant by this remark. Whatever the result, this was a meeting which I had to try to make. I felt better about it but I didn't learn a hell of a lot. I guess that I shouldn't have expected to learn a great deal from meeting with him.

The summer of 1963 passed with events really focusing on Saigon and statements coming out of Saigon. The street demonstrations in Hue had stopped. As I said, I think that there was a single case of “immolation” of a bonze in Hue after there had been a number of such incidents in Saigon. The next major event occurred on August 21, 1963. The new

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U. S. Ambassador to Vietnam, Henry Cabot Lodge, was enroute to Saigon to take up his post. The GVN undertook raids on the major pagodas in Saigon and in Hue. Martial law and a strict curfew were proclaimed in Hue and in Saigon. They were probably enforced more thoroughly in Hue than in Saigon, because Hue was more controllable, in the sense of physical security.

Q: Did the government raid pagodas in Hue? How many, do you remember?

HELBLE: They raided at least two pagodas in Hue, Tu Dam Pagoda being the focal point. I would have to review the record to recall the figure more precisely than that.

Q: I was working in the Vietnam Working Group in the Department of State in Washington at the time. We made a list of the pagodas that had been raided. There were about 20 in the whole country, out of a total of about 5,000 pagodas in the whole country. The representation that this was a "crackdown" on all pagodas was quite mistaken.

HELBLE: No, it was not.

Q: However, I'm afraid that this was the point where matters had gone beyond rational discussion. HELBLE: A "fine point" such as you are making was irrelevant.

Q: Furthermore, this had its impact in the Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs. I remember a staff meeting with our friend, Roger Hilsman, the Assistant Secretary, presiding. This was shortly after the pagoda raids. He said, "Well, the pagodas were raided by Vietnamese Special Forces under Ngo dinh Nhu Counselor of the GVN and brother of President Diem. We just can't stand for this." I said, "Roger, it isn't clear who was responsible for this. This is all preliminary information." Then he said, with a "shit-eating" smile on his face, "If it isn't true, then let's make it true." To me this man Hilsman was just so shallow. He was a person with no personal integrity at all. That really is what happened at that point.

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HELBLE: Right. Well, in Hue I could hear gunshots in the night. Tu Dam Pagoda was some distance away, but it was within the city limits of Hue. The pagoda and the Consulate were both on the South side of the Perfume River. I believe that I may have gotten my first, official indication of what was happening in Saigon from the Voice of America, if I recall correctly, when I heard one of their early morning broadcasts. I was quickly able to confirm that there had been some violence at Tu Dam Pagoda which resulted in a number of injuries to bonzes and their supporters, many of whom had been camping on the grounds of the pagoda for some weeks. There was a large number of arrests, although I do not recall the exact number. As I mentioned above, martial law was imposed. There wasn't a single person walking around on the streets. I know this because early in the morning, probably around 8:00 AM, I had gotten into my official vehicle and drove through the city. I crossed the bridge across the Perfume River into the old city. The bridge was under heavy guard, but my vehicle was allowed to pass. I had no other passengers in it. The police could see that I had consular plates on the car. I was probably known by a number of them by sight. American-provided armored personnel carriers were guarding certain key points. Nobody was going anywhere.

To be perfectly candid, I was "enraged" because, once again, I saw what I regarded as a clearly visible "misuse" of American equipment. I felt that this equipment was being used in a manner which, I considered, would cause us enormous "grief." Certainly, this didn't enhance our image with the Vietnamese in Hue, at least as far as I was concerned. I saw American-provided APC's Armored Personnel Carriers rattling around the town, blocking bridges, and that sort of thing. I recognized that my emotional response to this, which I had to "internalize" and not allow to be seen, was something that I just had to get under control. However, it was certainly my first reaction to what I was seeing.

Martial law continued in effect for some time. Things were really "clamped down." I was now under 24-hour a day surveillance, and anywhere I went there was a black Citroen in

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the rear view mirror. There was always one such vehicle parked outside my house—and not very discreetly hidden.

Perhaps several days after August 21, 1963, a young man with whom I had had a number of contacts, a man whom I would describe as basically an “intellectual” and who was basically a “political dissident,” came to my house. He wanted to discuss recent events and share information with me. We talked for a time. Then he said, “You know, I am concerned about my security.” He asked, “Can you give me something that I can send back to you in the event that I am arrested—something that you will recognize?” I said, “Well, I’ll give you a book.” I reached among my paperback books. I did not choose this book deliberately, but it was somewhat ironic when I realized that the book I was handing him was Dostoevsky’s “Crime and Punishment.” In any event, the book never came back to me. However, on the following day his wife called me and said that she knew that her husband had been coming to see me and that he had not returned home since the previous morning. I asked my gate guard if he had observed anything unusual, when this fellow had left the house on the previous day. He said, “Yes, when he walked out the gate, the black Citroen that parks over there pulled over to him and put him in it.”

I never heard from him again. I don’t know what happened to him, but that was the type of environment that we were now operating under. I knew that I had to be very discreet in approaching my very best contacts. When I did, some of them would say, “Look, I want to talk with you, but I just can’t, under these circumstances. I have a family,” and so forth. Others would say that we could meet, but it would have to be under some kind of cover, where “I would have a legitimate reason to be.” Others wouldn’t answer my attempts to contact them at all. It became very evident to me that I was de facto “PNG” persona non grata in this environment. It was simply a situation that I had to live with.

The situation continued unchanged throughout September. In mid-October of 1963 we decided that we would take our annual vacation and go to Baguio in the Philippines, which

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we had become rather fond of. So Joan, our son Stuart, and I went off to Baguio. We were planning to spend two weeks there.

While I was there, the DCM from the Embassy in Saigon, Bill Trueheart, also came over to stay in Baguio, at the Country Club, which is adjacent to Camp John Hay. We both had bungalows in that area. Trueheart asked me, in an aside and not in Joan's presence, "When are you getting back to Hue?" I said, "October 28." He said, "When you get back, I want you to pack one bag containing what you would need immediately for you and your family. Not more than one bag. We have intelligence reports that the Vietnamese Government is going to issue a massive 'White Paper' about the whole Buddhist episode. The blame is going to be placed very directly on the United States. Specifically, it's going to fall on you as the Consul in Hue, whom they will accuse of having created the problem, agitating about it, exacerbating it, and directing it." I said, "I couldn't direct something like that in my wildest dreams." He said, "Well, we know that, but they are looking for a 'goat,' and you're going to be the 'goat' in this white paper, backed up, in effect, by the U. S. Government." He said, "At that point, when that is issued, you and your family are going to be in serious danger up there. You'll have to clear out. As soon as that happens, we'll send a plane up to Hue, pick up you and your family, and get you out of there." I said, "When in hell is this going to happen?" He said, "Well, it's going to happen as soon as Madame Ngo dinh Nhu leaves the United States." You may recall that she was on a trip through the United States, moving from East to West. At that moment she was in Honolulu. She was spending several days in Hawaii, her last stop in U. S. territory. Trueheart said, "They do not want to embarrass her with this until she has left the United States." Trueheart said, "We are expecting the issuance of this White Paper about three days after you return to Vietnam."

So I went back to Hue with that "cheerful" news, after two pleasant weeks in Baguio. I said nothing to Joan about this. Before the White Paper was issued, the final coup against President Ngo dinh Diem took place.

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Q: *Was the paper ever issued?*

HELBLE: It was never issued. It would be interesting to know if there is a copy of it.

Q: *I really wonder if there ever was such a White Paper. Trueheart may have had a report about this, but, following the coup, I never saw such a paper or any further reference to it.*

HELBLE: I wouldn't have seen it up there in Hue.

Q: *But it would have been issued, or we would have gotten hold of a copy of it, if it ever existed. I really wonder if it did exist. But it may be that Trueheart very much believed this.*

Trueheart had some other problems, too. A friendship of virtually a lifetime—a long friendship with Ambassador Fritz Nolting Ambassador to Vietnam—went “blooey” over this whole business. I liked Ambassador Nolting. However, for some reason, which I never could quite understand, right in the middle of all of this—I think that it was in July, 1963, Nolting decided that it was time for him to take leave. He went to Greece and was having a vacation down in the Greek islands. Well, I was never an Ambassador, but I would think that in a situation like that, I would not leave a country that was possibly on the verge of an explosion. Would you?

HELBLE: Well, as a matter of fact, I had an opportunity to address that very issue when I was DCM to Ambassador David Schneider in Dhaka, Bangladesh, in 1981. Dave was scheduled to depart from the Embassy transfer in early July 1981. He had said all of his farewells, his household goods had been packed, and he was leaving less than 48 hours later, on a Monday. On the previous Saturday morning President Zia of Bangladesh was assassinated. I was the first person in the Embassy to learn of this through a contact who called me. As soon as I got into contact with Ambassador Schneider, we went to the Embassy to discuss the situation with his key advisers. I said to him, “David, the nature of this country is such that the United States runs the risk of being blamed in any event, because we are blamed for all kinds of things that we had nothing to do with. However,

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given the peculiar twists of minds in this country and in India, which regards Bangladesh as virtually its own, there is going to be a widespread conviction that your departure was an admission that we did it and that you were getting out of the country before they could get the goods on you." I said that it was my strong recommendation that for that, as well as for other, obvious reasons, e.g., if we have to take some position with the Bangladeshi government, that he should advise Washington that he plans to stay in Dhaka for at least another week.

Q: I think that that was sound advice.

HELBLE: Ambassador Schneider agreed. He wired Washington that he was going to stay for at least another week, and the Department approved.

I think that that's the end of where we are in terms of the coup against Ngo dinh Diem. That's perhaps a good point to break.

Q: Good.

—

HELBLE: November 1, 1963, brought the coup d'etat against Diem by the military junta.

In Hue martial law was imposed. However, as the coup succeeded rather rapidly, martial law did not endure in any meaningful way. There was widespread jubilation over the success of the coup among most groups in Hue. The security situation was all right. There was no violence or untoward incidents. With the "liberation," if you will—as many people saw it—from the regime and the relaxation which immediately followed, in terms of the atmosphere in general, people were primarily concerned about freeing whatever political prisoners could be located. There were some of these, but I cannot give any estimate in terms of numbers. One of the more dramatic things that occurred late in the afternoon after the coup on November 3, 1963, was the discovery of the rather horrific prison about

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a mile or two west of Hue, in the general direction of the imperial tombs. It turned out that there had been a number of people incarcerated in an area which had been a former French ammunition depot. This was discovered, and a number of people were released from it. The people of Hue moved in large numbers to the site of this prison to look at it. I had the opportunity to do so myself. The bunkers in which ammunition had been stored were driven into a hillside and were later converted into prison cells. They were about 5-6 feet long, perhaps 3 1/2 feet wide, and perhaps 3 1/2 feet high. They had bare floors and no furniture—nothing in them, except human excrement and other trash that had accumulated in the cells. Each cell had a barred gate on it. These cells would have been rather uncomfortable.

Q: Even Vietnamese couldn't stand in them.

HELBLER: Yeah. Even Vietnamese couldn't stand up. This, of course, provoked further outrage against the excesses of the previous regime. The military coup authorities had detained or placed under house arrest officials from the previous government whose movements they wanted to restrict. However, there were no large-scale arrests. Some people were arrested, but not many. There was concern that there might be residual elements of the former government within the military who might undertake some counteraction. However, these concerns turned out to be unwarranted. There was an intelligence report which indicated that the "Forces Populaires" of Ngo Dinh Can, which we discussed previously, would seek retribution and had already determined in their minds that the Americans were responsible for the coup against Diem. The American community in Hue was allegedly under some threat. I felt that this was very unlikely, although the U. S. military senior adviser to the ARVN 1st Division, Colonel Ed Markey, thought it prudent, acting on his own, to ask the new military authority, General Do Cao Tri, the I Corps commander who was present in Hue, to post guards around all of the American residences and facilities. When I saw a squad of ARVN soldiers being deployed in my yard for this purpose, and I learned from a lieutenant on the scene that this was in accordance with orders from headquarters, I went over to talk to Colonel Markey and told him in no

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uncertain terms that he did not have the authority to request the Vietnamese military to post these guards around U. S. civilian residences or installations. Then I went to General Do cao Tri and asked him to remove these security guards immediately. General Tri agreed to my request. This caused an unpleasant scene with Colonel Markey. After the matter was thrashed out in Saigon, within about a week Colonel Markey was relieved and reassigned in the Mekong Delta area.

Little of great note happened in the next 24 hours. Then I was approached by three individuals, separately, who requested that Ngo dinh Can, who had not been located or arrested but was in hiding, be granted “asylum” at our Consulate. I responded to each request that I would take the matter under advisement. I immediately communicated these approaches to the Department of State in Washington. In my report I informed the Department, first of all, that I could not be certain of the “bona fides” of any of these three individuals. Although I knew all three of them to varying degrees, I could not be sure whether one or more than one of them might be an “agent provocateur” or be misrepresenting their concerns. Aside from that, I pointed out to the Department that, under the “Foreign Affairs Manual” [FAM], a Consulate was not to accord asylum, and that we did not have such authority under international law as well. Under the FAM, the nature of asylum in a diplomatic mission was very narrowly restricted to circumstances in which the individual seeking asylum was in immediate, life threatening danger. An example given was that an individual might be hotly pursued by an angry mob. However, even under those circumstances, it would be required that, as soon as the immediate threat passed, the individual must be removed from the premises—in effect, put out of the door.

I also pointed out that, from a political point of view, people in Hue were certainly relieved, as were people elsewhere, at the removal of the Diem regime. They had a great deal of dislike for Mr. Can and his authoritarian rule over a number of years. Granting him asylum would not improve the U. S. “image” in the immediate area around Hue. Furthermore, as an extension of that, I pointed out that if Mr. Can were installed in the Consulate under condition of asylum, and this became known, the news would spread like wildfire in Hue.

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Given the attitudes among the people of Hue, who had just observed the harsh prison conditions that I have described and who had many other grievances against Mr. Can, the people of Hue might decide to take Mr. Can into their own hands. The consular status of the Consulate building would hardly guarantee the security of the building, its occupants, or, indeed, anybody in the American community at that point.

There was an exchange of messages. I received a response from the Department, which was not definitive. It asked a few more questions. I answered those questions and reiterated my strong view that we should not grant this request, even if one or more of these requests were made in a bona fide way. Within 36 hours I was instructed to give Mr. Can asylum. Upon his arrival at the Consulate, I was asked to inquire as to what country he would like to go to for more permanent asylum. I was asked to inform both the Department and the Embassy when he arrived at the Consulate and what his choice of asylum was. Once that instruction was received from the Department, I was also in touch with the Embassy in Saigon. Some of that was handled over the telephone on a non-secure line. Efforts made to speak in "guarded" terms were probably useless, but I tried to do so. The Embassy advised me that they would send a C-46 transport plane, a CIA aircraft, to Phu Bai airport South of Hue as soon as Mr. Can arrived in the Consulate.

I then got in touch with the person whom I regarded as the most reliable of the three contacts I mentioned before.. I informed him that I would be prepared to accept Mr. Can at the Consulate. He got back in touch with me fairly shortly thereafter and said that Mr. Can would arrive at the Consulate in disguise and in the company of a Catholic priest, who would be driving the vehicle, at 11:00 AM, if I remember the time correctly, on Tuesday, which would have been, I believe, November 5, 1963. This time was approximately an hour before he actually arrived at the Consulate. Mr. Can did, indeed, arrive at the Consulate. He was lying on the floor of the back seat of an old Citroen. The chauffeur was a Vietnamese priest.

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I greeted Can in the driveway in front of the porch of the Consulate and invited him to go upstairs, trying to shield him from observation by several of my local employees. These Vietnamese employees were working in an office to the right, as I led him up the stairs. Whether my attempt to shield him from observation succeeded or not, I do not know. I immediately raised with Mr. Can the question of where he would like to be sent for his “safe haven” overseas. He promptly told me, “Tokyo.”

At about this time I received a phone call from one of my local employees, telling me that General Do cao Tri, the previously mentioned I Corps Commander, was downstairs and wanted to see me. I left Jerry Greiner, the CIA Vice Consul, with Mr. Can and went downstairs to see General Tri in our small reception room. General Tri started by saying quite bluntly, as was his practice, that I “had” Ngo dinh Can in the building and that he, General Tri, “wanted” him. I told General Tri that, whether I had Ngo dinh Can or not, was a matter of my concern and not his. He then indicated that, given the atmosphere in Hue, in view of the hostility toward Can, should the people of Hue become aware of his presence in the Consulate, he could not ensure the security of the Consulate or of the American community in Hue in general. I immediately replied that it was clearly General Tri's responsibility to ensure the security of the Consulate, of American facilities, and of American personnel in Hue. I was at this point formally requesting that he provide such assurances and that I would immediately report this conversation to the Embassy in Saigon and his response. He gave no such assurances. I repeated that it was his responsibility, that I expected him to do so, and that this was a formal communication to that effect.

General Tri then left the Consulate. I returned to discuss the situation with Mr Can, but there was little more that I needed to discuss with him, once we had established that Tokyo was his preferred destination. I immediately called the Embassy in Saigon and informed them that “I had the bird in the cage.” They advised me that within two hours the C-46 would arrive at Phu Bai airport, and I was to be there with Mr Can. I immediately

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sent a message to the Department saying that Can was in the Consulate. I called in the senior U. S. military adviser to the ARVN 1st Division, his deputy, and my CIA colleague Vice Consul Greiner. We developed a scenario for a small convoy to transport Can to Phu Bai airport, a distance of 14 kilometers. The convoy consisted of a jeep with an Enlisted Man and an Officer in the front, followed by my official vehicle containing the senior U. S. military adviser, the CIA Vice Consul, myself, and Mr Can, and another U. S. military jeep containing an officer and an enlisted man, following us.

We left the Consulate with just enough time to get to Phu Bai airport, in terms of the ETA (Estimated Time of Arrival) of the C-46 aircraft. The trip to the airport was uneventful. We did not encounter any difficulties. We placed Mr Can on the plane. I had arranged with Vice Consul Jerry Greiner to accompany him, and I instructed Jerry to turn Mr Can over to the Embassy and the Embassy only.

Greiner and Can flew to Tan Son Nhut airport in Saigon. When the door was opened, Greiner found that the plane had been parked on the military side of Tan Son Nhut airport and that there was a sizable contingent of ARVN troops surrounding the plane, with a couple of ARVN 2 1/2 ton trucks with canvas covering the rear of the trucks, off to one side. Greiner was greeted by Lucien Conein, a well known CIA officer, who informed him, "All right, Jerry. I will take it from here." Jerry took the position that Conein was not the Embassy and told him that the Consul's orders had been to turn Can over to the Embassy. Conein said, "Well, have it your way, but here's your transportation." So Greiner and Can boarded the back of one of the 2 1/2 ton trucks. The canvas flap was closed, and they rumbled off. After a drive of 15-20 minutes the truck stopped, the canvas was pulled back, and Greiner saw that he was in the midst of the better part of a battalion of ARVN troops in a large, ARVN installation, somewhere in Saigon. Conein appeared again and said, "This is the end of the road." Greiner had no alternative but to yield to the situation.

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That was the extent of my direct involvement and that of the Consulate in Hue in the Can episode. As history will show, Can eventually was tried by the Vietnamese military authorities, was sentenced to death, and was executed.

Q: Was this by firing squad?

HELBLE: By firing squad. These events all occurred in Saigon, and I had no further involvement with them—with one exception.

Shortly after the execution of Ngo dinh Can, there was a great deal of unhappiness expressed in the United States, primarily from the Catholic community, but from others as well, who felt that the Ngo family had suffered enough from the coup, with Diem and his brother, Ngo dinh Nhu, killed. It was felt that the U. S. was involved in this by taking Can, turning him over to the new Vietnamese authorities, and then “standing by” while he was sentenced and executed. This was felt by these Americans to have been an improper course of action for the U. S.—or a combination of action and inaction.

A friend of mine, Larry Pezzulo, the Assistant General Services Officer in Saigon, subsequently told me of an incident that occurred about two days after the execution of Ngo dinh Can. Pezzulo was involved in this incident, to the extent that he was the Embassy Duty Officer at the time. An “Urgent” priority message arrived at the Embassy, while he was Embassy Duty Officer, which had to be delivered to Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge. Pezzulo took the message, I believe, to Ambassador Lodge's residence. Wherever it was, Ambassador Lodge and the DCM, Bill Trueheart, were both at dinner. Pezzulo called them out of the dinner, showed them the telegram, and the two of them read it. Ambassador Lodge and DCM Trueheart appeared to be deeply concerned because they were in some political “trouble.” According to Pezzulo's account of this to me, Ambassador Lodge inquired of Bill Trueheart, “What do you think we ought to do about this?” Trueheart indicated, in Pezzulo's presence, that it was clear that we needed

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some scapegoat—somebody to pin the blame on. Trueheart reportedly said, “Obviously, our Consul in Hue is the likely possibility for this.”

Pezzulo was horrified at this, because he knew the circumstances very well. We had discussed the Ngo dinh Can affair in Saigon during a trip that I made to Saigon after the coup but before the events of this particular evening. In any event, nothing really came of that. It was another indication to me that one had to have a lot of luck, in addition to being careful, to escape some of the problems which can jeopardize your Foreign Service career.

Q: Did you ever find out what that message contained? Did you ever see it?

HELBLE: I never saw it.

Q: Any idea of what its substance was?

HELBLE: It was a message from the Department reporting the “uproar” in the United States over the handling of the Ngo dinh Can case. The Embassy was being asked by the Department to make recommendations to Washington as to how to handle this “uproar.” I will say that, in subsequent years, in the mid 1960's, after I had returned to the United States and was working on Vietnamese affairs, I had occasion to draft answers to a lot of public correspondence and Congressional inquiries. On a number of occasions one of the issues that I had to address was this incident involving Ngo dinh Can because there were people in the U. S. who continued to refer to what they regarded as a “perfidious action” on the part of the United States and were still complaining about it. Because my name had appeared associated with the episode, in various articles at the time, I was frequently answering mail, not for my signature, but for the signatures of persons well above me, addressing the very issue in which I was being accused. This was never something that I worried a great deal about, but it is just a footnote to this incident.

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Q: It doesn't seem to have hurt you very much, John. Your recommendation was in accordance with the Foreign Affairs Manual and was the right one, in terms of our whole history and tradition. I think that the decision first to grant asylum to Thich Tri Quang in the Embassy after the pagoda raids of August 21 was a mistake. The decision to grant asylum to Cardinal Mindszenty in Hungary in our Legation in Budapest after the 1956 Hungarian uprising was also a mistake. I think that the decision to give Ngo dinh Can asylum in the Consulate in Hue was a mistake. That is just no way to operate. It is not in our tradition and not in our custom. John, is there anything else that you want to go into?

HELBLE: As one other aftermath of the coup which overthrew the Diem government in 1963, one of the officials arrested after the coup by the incoming military junta was Major Dang Sy. You will recall that Major Dang Sy was the Deputy Province Chief in Thua Thien province in charge of security. He was responsible for the Civil Guard forces which became involved in the "Buddhist" incident at the radio station in Hue on May 8, 1963. Dang Sy was charged with responsibility for that incident. He was tried, found guilty, and sentenced to be executed by firing squad. I did not attend the trial but I had followed it.

The sentence was handed down, and the date for execution was set for approximately three to four months after the coup. It may have been February, March, or early April, 1964. However, for whatever reason, I was instructed by the Embassy to attend Dang Sy's execution by firing squad, which was slated to take place in the modest stadium in Hue. I never understood why it was necessary for the U. S. Consul to observe the execution, but I did as I was instructed. It was a solemn occasion. The general public was invited, and I suppose that there were several thousand people in attendance. Dang Sy was, indeed, executed before my very eyes. This caused me some personal distress because I had worked closely with Dang Sy, when he was in his security position in Thua Thien province. I had found him a very candid, likeable, and, as far as I could tell, a quite honest official. I thought that he was one of the brighter, young military officers that I had met during my time in Hue. It was clear to me that this was another "scapegoat" exercise and that, in

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point of fact, it was considered essential, in the atmosphere after the coup that somebody should be blamed for the incident and some action taken that would mollify the people of Hue. I believe that Dang Sy was unjustly “pinned” with that responsibility. In any event, he did not deserve the fate that he received.

The rest of the spring and early summer of 1964 was marked largely by a continuation of the political turmoil, a lack of governmental direction, firm policies, and clear lines of authority. There was a lot of maneuvering on the political front, which was occurring primarily in Saigon and in the military high command. I had little to contribute in terms of direct observation of any of this, but it was an environment which affected the entire country in terms of a lack of direction and coherent policy, as well as political maneuvering. This had its impact in that government programs in the countryside floundered, and little progress was made in the major struggle against the Viet Cong. Security conditions continued to deteriorate—not dramatically, but there was a steady erosion of the situation, as had been going on for several years.

I will now go to what was the final significant event in my experience in Hue. In some respects, perhaps, it was the most significant. I was scheduled to leave Hue immediately after our “Fourth of July reception” on July 4, 1964, for reassignment. By now I had completed four years in Vietnam. A few days before I was scheduled to leave Hue I gave a farewell dinner, to which I invited the senior Vietnamese officials. General Do cao Tri, the I Corps Commander; the ARVN 1st Division commander; the chief of Thua Thien province; and the senior U. S. military adviser to the ARVN 1st Division were all there. The senior U. S. military adviser was the only other American present. During the course of the dinner several “runners” came in from ARVN 1st Division headquarters, which was located in The Citadel of the Imperial City of Hue. They delivered messages to General Tri and to the ARVN 1st Division commander, who promptly shared them with us. There apparently was an upsurge of Viet Cong incidents occurring in the area. Reports were coming in from a number of outposts in the northern part of the I Corps area—that is, Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces. Finally, before we had dessert, another “runner” came. The

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message was so dramatic that we broke up the dinner and went on to the ARVN 1st Division headquarters, in the Imperial City.

One of the things that had triggered the breakup of the dinner was the report that two enemy soldiers had just been brought into headquarters. They had been captured East of Route 1 and North of Hue, along the Thua Thien-Quang Tri provincial border. There was a very narrow strip of land between Route 1 and the coast of the South China Sea at that point—an area probably no more than three or four kilometers wide. Indeed, this was the precise area that was known during the Indochina War Against the French as “the street without joy,” a reference to the numerous bloody ambushes the Viet Minh inflicted on the French in the early 1950s. The two prisoners were members of regular North Vietnamese Army units—PAVN or the People's Army of Vietnam. When we got to ARVN 1st Division headquarters, we were given a quick briefing from the officers in charge at headquarters. General Tri asked if I would like to talk to the prisoners. I said that I would welcome the opportunity. We interviewed them. The first prisoner clearly spoke the North Vietnamese dialect. The second prisoner indicated that they had been captured because they had become disoriented in a battle that was still going on. They had lost their way and couldn't find their units. They had been picked up as “stragglers” by ARVN troops. They had never been to the area before, were unfamiliar with it, and didn't know where to go. Each of them—and we talked to them individually—acknowledged that about 90 days previously they had arrived in the A Shau Valley, which was in western Thua Thien province, and was, for all intents and purposes, enemy territory. ARVN occasionally had small outposts there but did not control the territory.

They had entered South Vietnam with their respective battalions as regular units of North Vietnamese divisions. One was the 324th Division, and I forget the designations of their regiments and battalions. I now forget the number of the other division, but it was one which the other prisoner had been assigned to. Each of them said that they had come down the Ho Chi Minh trail with their units intact. They had rested for about 90 days in the A Shau Valley area, were trained and resupplied there, and then launched their attack

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earlier that day before they were separated from their main units. It was already dark when they were captured.

This was the first time that there was evidence of integral North Vietnamese Army units operating South of the DMZ. There had long been North Vietnamese cadres in South Vietnam. Small groups had come in, operated most often in conjunction with some of the local Viet Cong forces...

Q: John, what was the date of this incident and therefore of your dinner party?

HELBLER: If I recall correctly, it was July 2, 1964. I could be "off" by a day, but I think it was July 2, 1964. In any event, I was totally convinced that we now had on our hands a real "smoking gun" in terms of a change in North Vietnamese activity and tactics. They were now sending into South Vietnam large bodies of troops, organized and directed entirely in North Vietnamese Army fashion, and using strictly North Vietnamese Army personnel instead of Viet Cong cadres who had been born in South Vietnam.

At the same time that we were learning this at the division headquarters, we also learned that there had been something like 40 bridges blown up in the previous 12 hours in northern Quang Nam, Thua Thien, and Quang Tri provinces. A number of ARVN outposts had been attacked, some of which had been overrun. One or two South Vietnamese "Special Forces" camps in the western part of this area were undergoing heavy attack and were in danger of being overrun. There was a report that as much as a battalion-sized unit had made an incursion directly across the DMZ from North Vietnam into South Vietnam, although there was no follow-up report on that. Indeed, the incident in which the two PAVN soldiers were captured occurred in an area East of Route 1, which had been virtually "incident free" during the three years that I had been in Hue.

Furthermore, an ARVN outpost located at what was known as PK (Kilometer Post) 17, 17 kilometers North of Hue on Route 1, had despatched all of its fighting troops into the various battles going on in the area. The North Vietnamese were in the immediate

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proximity of PK 17 which, at that point, was in no position to hold anything. There were no security forces between Hue and PK 17. ARVN troops were widely deployed throughout the area and had been reinforced by most of the reserves available to the 1st Division. As a result, I Corps had nothing left to deal immediately with the situation. General Tri sent a "Flash" message to his headquarters in Saigon, describing the situation and calling for the immediate despatch of Airborne troops to assist in handling the situation.

The entire situation was clearly one which, from a security and military point of view, was unprecedented at any time since the end of the Indochina War Against the French, in that particular area. It might not have been that uncommon in other areas in the Mekong Delta, Tay Ninh province northwest of Saigon, or in certain areas around Saigon. It was unprecedented in the Hue and Quang Tri area.

Q: I think that it was unprecedented in terms of regular, PAVN units.

HELBLE: That was definitely unprecedented. In any event, I returned to the Consulate and immediately drafted a report containing this information because, if a North Vietnamese incursion had occurred across the DMZ, that could really open up a "can of worms." If, in fact, the PAVN units marched 17 kilometers down Route 1 from PK 17 to Hue, there was nothing to stop them in the Hue area at that point.

I sent this message, detailing all of the above, including the account of the capture and interview of the two PAVN stragglers, via "Flash" message to the Department in Washington. The message, of course, was repeated to the Embassy in Saigon, via the Clark Field Philippines communications facility. My message went off at approximately midnight. A parallel message was being prepared by the U. S. Military Senior Adviser to the ARVN 1st Division. My message was "cleared" with the adviser, since he was present during most of these events.

Q: What was the name of the adviser?

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HELBLER: This I cannot recall, because Col Markey, whom I referred to earlier, had been relieved. I do not recall the name of his replacement, but he was a very steady fellow. He reported through his channels, which went through the I Corps Advisory Detachment in Da Nang. The duty officer at this detachment was awakened, digested this, and then proceeded to ask further questions before forwarding his report to MACV [Military Assistance Command, Vietnam] headquarters in Saigon. This took some time, which was not necessary in my situation. I understand that some time around 3:00-4:00 AM the duty officer at MACV was awakened, not by a message from Da Nang, but rather by a message from the National Military Command Center [NMCC] in Washington, which had received a copy of my report to the State Department. The NMCC, of course, in effect, said to MACV, "What the hell's going on out there?" They had heard nothing from MACV. Well, the reaction to this in Saigon was rather classic and ultimately, as we will see, extremely ironic. General Paul Harkins was still in command of MACV.

General William Westmoreland, his ultimate replacement, had arrived in Vietnam and was "reading in" on the job. I myself had spent five hours alone with him at Ambassador Lodge's residence in Saigon, briefing him several weeks prior to this on security matters that we're now discussing. However, Westmoreland was not in command.

General Harkins was still in command, getting ready to leave in a short time. General Maxwell Taylor had arrived in Saigon as the new Ambassador. General Harkins and his staff were outraged that they had no information with which to respond immediately to the NMCC in Washington. They were annoyed that they should have been informed about all of this "frenetic" activity up in the northern part of South Vietnam by Washington and not by their own subordinate echelons. Shortly after this reports were coming in from the Senior Advisory Detachment in I Corps in Da Nang. I don't have the foggiest idea what MACV reported to Washington.

However, I learned directly from the Embassy on the following day that MACV, in effect, was "discounting" most of what I had reported. Perhaps 36 hours after my initial report,

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the Embassy summarized to me a MACV report to Washington for my comment. The MACV report said, more or less, "Well, yes, there were 48 bridges or so blown up, but 24 of them have been restored. Yes, a Vietnamese Special Forces camp was almost overrun, but with one-third of the camp still intact, the enemy was finally repulsed. Yes, there had been these widespread incidents, but they had now ceased." It was that sort of a message. Regarding the capture of the two PAVN soldiers, MACV said, "In the absence of a thorough debriefing, there was no evidence to conclude" that my report was valid.

At that point I only had another day or two left in Hue. I had continued with follow-up reports, some of which reflected the same type of things that MACV was now saying, "Yes, but." The heavy action had ceased by the next day, the Vietnamese Special Forces camp was still holding out and relief was on the way, and so forth. I continued to submit updated reports on the situation until I left, and then I went to Saigon.

When I got to the Embassy in Saigon, I was told that my successor, Sam Thomsen, would be receiving an instruction on the following day that all of his reporting was to be sent to the Embassy in Saigon, which would decide what, if anything, should be forwarded to Washington. It was indicated very clearly that this was the result of MACV's insistence, which was very unhappy at having been caught "with their drawers around their knees." They convinced General Maxwell Taylor that the Consul in Hue should no longer have an independent reporting channel to Washington. I felt badly about that, but there wasn't much that I could do about it. I still believed that I had done the right thing in this respect. A footnote to that is really the most important thing. In February, 1965, I was blissfully attending the University of Chicago on a program of university training. I picked up the morning paper, having heard briefly on the news the previous night of the introduction of U. S. ground combat forces into Vietnam. Marines had landed near Da Nang and so forth. I read with great care and interest the full text of the MACV press conference, at which the introduction of these forces was announced. This provided the rationale for this very dramatic change in the level of U. S. participation in the Vietnam war. Until then, while we had had a number of U. S. military involved in the war, to the extent that they were being

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shot at and we were taking casualties, we did not have regular, ground combat units being dispatched to secure areas and to take on the enemy.

The key rationale used, as far as I could see, was that this action was taken in response to a change by the North Vietnamese in their conduct of the war. That is, the North Vietnamese were now sending regular army units into combat in South Vietnam. The first evidence of this was the capture of two North Vietnamese regular soldiers in an incident in early July, 1964, which I have previously described here. Yet this rationale came from the very same command, MACV which, seven and a half months earlier, had “pooh-poohed” the whole thing and had been very critical of the report. They were now utilizing it, and I think properly so, as justification for the change in the nature of American involvement in South Vietnam. However, this was an ironic development from my point of view. Finally, it should be noted that the July '64 MACV-Max Taylor action to cut off Consulate Hue's direct communication link to Washington was a classic bureaucratic response to embarrassment: Don't address the substantive issue - just kill the messenger!

Q: John, what assignment did you go to in Washington?

HELBLER: Let me make one more point about Vietnam. I referred to a long discussion which I had had with General Westmoreland when he arrived in Vietnam to become the commander of MACV. As I recall, this discussion occurred about the first week of June, 1964. At the time I was in Saigon on consultation. Ambassador Lodge had asked me to set aside an hour during which I would just talk with General Westmoreland and give him my observations after four years in Vietnam and before General Westmoreland assumed charge of his command. Ambassador Lodge suggested that this discussion might be held in Lodge's livingroom.

We met at 4:00 PM that afternoon, and the two of us talked for about five hours. General Westmoreland was very interested and asked a lot of questions. It was more of a briefing than a conversation. At about 8:00 PM the Ambassador's staff brought us a bite to eat. We

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kept going and finished at about 9:00 PM. As I said, I hoped that General Westmoreland would prove to be a more worthy commander of the U. S. military forces in Vietnam than General Harkins had been. I had had no regard for General Harkins' understanding of the situation he was dealing with. I thought that General Harkins had been just short of a disaster as the commander of MACV. I thought that General Westmoreland was very promising. He certainly was interested and asked a lot of the right questions. I was very optimistic that he was going to be a significant improvement, at a minimum.

One of the key points that I focused on in our discussion was my view that U. S. military forces could not do the “on the ground job” in Vietnam. The nature of the conflict was too “gray” and not “black and white” enough. The complexities of how to deal with it were too great for an outside force, such as the American military, to understand and deal effectively with. I had heard many American military advisers say, “Just give me one U. S. division. We'll start at the tip of Ca Mau the peninsula (the Southernmost part of South Vietnam) and we'll march north. We'll have this place cleaned out in six months.” Unfortunately, that view, which reflected a great deal of confidence, which one may admire up to a point, demonstrated a total lack of understanding of the nature of the conflict. I told General Westmoreland that Vietnamese forces had to do most of the fighting. U. S. forces had the capability and could effectively provide logistical support, possibly including artillery and air support. However, “on the ground” fighting really, I thought, could only be done by the Vietnamese. If they couldn't do it, then it couldn't be done.

I kept coming back to that point, in one form or another during this session. I thought that General Westmoreland understood it quite well. However, history will show, of course, that, whether he understood it or not, that position was not followed.

That really wraps up my account of experiences in Hue, and that's a good point to take a break.

Q: *Okay.*

This is August 8, 1996. John, when we last broke off this interview, you were just leaving Hue, Vietnam, enroute to the United States, I believe, for an assignment in the Department of State. Would you pick it up from there?

HELBLER: Right. About July 7, 1964, I left Saigon with my wife, Joan, and son, Stuart, on a leisurely trip back to the United States. We visited such glorious places as Bangkok, Beirut, Athens, Rome, Florence, Perpignan in southern France, and Paris. Then we visited family members in the United States.

In early September, 1964, I reported to the University of Chicago to begin study under a Fellowship Grant from the National Institute of Public Affairs. I had chosen the University of Chicago, which were among the five universities available under this fellowship program. The program was for government employees—a limited number every year, across the board. The other universities at which such study could be pursued included Harvard, Princeton, the University of Virginia, and Stanford. However, the University of Chicago was centrally located to my family and had an excellent reputation. The fellowship grant provided me with an opportunity to spend a year decompressing after the intensive work that I had done in Vietnam, 1960-64. This was a real opportunity after the eight years I had spent in the Foreign Service.

There were no limitations on what courses I could take. I had full access to the range of course offerings available at the University of Chicago. I could take these courses for credit or not. I chose to take courses for credit, although one or two I audited casually. We moved into graduate student housing not far from the campus in the southern part of Chicago. We lived with other graduate students who, by and large, were much younger than I, including a couple who were on the same fellowship program as I was. The interaction with other graduate students was, in itself, an experience worth having and was revealing.

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It changed or broadened some of my perspectives with respect to what was and what wasn't important in life to some people. For example, when some of our household goods arrived in damaged condition, we were somewhat distressed but were put straight by the couple who lived next to us. They made it clear that these were only material possessions, and one shouldn't become so attached to them. While I thought that that was kind of a cruel statement, under the circumstances, as I reflected on it, it helped me in future moves and my future life, not to attach much attention to one's personal belongings.

Q: That's a very good point. My first boss in the Foreign Service, Russ Jordan, told me that three moves in the Foreign Service are equivalent to a fire that destroys your effects totally. It never worked out that way with us. In fact, we had very few losses. I think that we lost a couple of glasses—that's all, in 32 years. So Russ was mistaken...

HELBLE: You were defying the odds in that case. As I said, the year was one of respite from the pressure cauldron of Vietnam. It was a chance to get reacquainted with the United States. It accorded me some time with my family, of which there had been very little during the Vietnam experience.

It was certainly an intellectually challenging time in the academic environment. I had forgotten how tough university study could be, having been away from formal study for eight years. Certainly, it was at a level of academic requirements that stretched me. I did manage to get through it with a little less than a "straight 'A'" average but I certainly didn't get any "C's." For a graduate student it was a real "No, No" if you got a "C."

Q: Did you ever have a faculty adviser or counselor?

HELBLE: My faculty adviser was a graduate student who was working on his Ph. D. degree in political science. He was the adviser to several of us in this program. He scheduled seminars and brought in speakers at these seminars. He counseled and

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assisted us in our academic efforts when we needed it. He was a first rate fellow—very practical and seemed to enjoy the interaction with our group.

Q: John, this was a period when the whole Vietnam issue was becoming a major, national concern. You and I had been living with this for some time. Later on, we lived with it at different times and in different places. How did you find the atmosphere at the University of Chicago on the Vietnam question? Were you often under attack?

HELBLE: Well, I was going to get into that but I'm glad that you raised it. I'll go to it right now.

The experience and the background that I had in Vietnam came to bear repeatedly during my time at the University of Chicago. My first exposure to some of the attitudes at the university was quite an eye-opener. During the first week, before classes began, I was sitting in the Social Science Lounge, having a cup of coffee and reading. On the sofa backing up to mine was a young couple. They were undergraduate students—the young man was a sophomore and the other one was a young lady who was a freshman. She asked her companion, “Well, tell me about Vietnam.” So the young man started out, talking about Ho Chi Minh and the War Against the French 1945-54. She said, “No, I don't want to know about the history. I just want to know what the 'radical position' is.” [Laughter]

Of course, it took a fair amount of restraint on my part to avoid getting involved in this discussion. Indeed, there was a lot of that sort of thing. You and I both saw it repeatedly in the years that followed, when “ignorance was bliss,” and there was no real desire to understand the complexities and the shades of gray, and so on. Just take the radical position - or take the ultra-conservative position.

Q: There were a few of those, but not very many.

HELBLE: No. Certainly not at the University of Chicago. To jump ahead a bit, I had another experience. I took three courses during the year from the famed Professor

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Hans Morgenthau. The last of these courses covered modern diplomatic history since 1945, which really meant a 20 year period, since it was 1965 when I took that course. I suggested at one point to Dr. Morgenthau that, in lieu of a final exam, I might write a paper for him on Vietnam, and specifically on rural development in Vietnam—a subject in which I had some interest and some background. Morgenthau's response was, “Ach, I haf no time to read papers. You vill take the final exam.” I said, “Well, I thought that it might be interesting to you because you obviously are concerned about Vietnam. You so indicated in your lectures and elsewhere. Perhaps you'd like to broaden your basic knowledge on this subject.” He replied, “Ach! You vill take the final exam! I haf no time for a paper.”

So there was another example which paralleled, in a sense, the “just give me the radical position” approach.

*Q: Speaking of Dr. Morgenthau, I think that this bears on the whole issue. I think that Paul Kattenburg a retired Foreign Service Officer bumped into Hans Morgenthau at some point. Morgenthau “charged” —I guess that this was his normal way of conversing with people. He said, regarding Vietnam, “You're not taking this position because of moral considerations, are you?” Kattenburg assured him that that was not the fundamental point. Morgenthau seemed satisfied with that. Maybe this was at the root of all of this attitude. He wrote a book called, *In Defense of the National Interest*. He attacked, in particular, the 'moral' component of foreign policy, thinking that it was absurd, ridiculous, and so on. Maybe this was one of his ultimate considerations.*

HELBLE: He was one of the ultimate advocates of realpolitik power politics. This probably reflected his European background and his familiarity with the balance of power politics played in Europe and so on.

I had other experiences related to Vietnam. I was asked to appear on a late night TV show with a moderator and an English professor from the University of Chicago. This program was telecast for about an hour and a half, from around 1:00 AM to 2:30 AM. I doubt that

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there were many viewers tuned into the program. No doubt it had a zero Nielsen rating. However, again I was dealing with somebody who had never been to Vietnam but who had a good command of the radical or liberal position. I thought to myself that it was absurd that the TV station could not get someone better qualified in terms of substantive knowledge and background to articulate that particular position, facing someone, like myself, who had spent four years in Vietnam and had been dealing with the issue for a long time. But that's the way it was. Both you and I saw that many, many times in the following years as we were on the public speaking trail, where we had to deal in debate or panel situations. You were frequently dealing with people who had heard about Saigon but couldn't locate it on the map, or somebody who had spent a weekend in Saigon, having left an American Friends Society assignment in India and stopped in Saigon for 48 hours—and then came back as an “expert” on Vietnam.

Q: I think you're right. One of the points that struck me, as I went around the universities to give talks on Vietnam was that frequently it was the people who were not from a history or political science background who were the most radical. It tended to be the English or math professors who were really the most radical. In other words, they were not disturbed or burdened by having any knowledge of the matter at all. I think that this circumstance ensured that the factual basis of the discussion would be low. In fact, I heard as good questions, on the whole, from high school students as I heard from university students. I don't know if this was your experience.

HELBLE: Yes, I encountered Vietnam-related issues from time to time at the University of Chicago, but it was not a major focus of interest. There were one or two all night teach-in's at the University of Chicago that year 1964-65. I managed to suppress the desire to attend and participate in them.

As I say, the year was a respite from the tensions of Vietnam. I would study in the evening, usually until about 11:00 PM, at which time I turned on the first “Late Show” on TV. We didn't have TV in Vietnam in 1960-64, so I was kind of starved for TV. I would watch the

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"Late Show." Then, about 1:00 AM the "Late, Late Show" would come on, and I would watch that. Then the "Late, Late, Late Show" would come on at about 3:00 AM, and I would watch that. It was frequently about 5:30 or 6:00 AM when I went to bed.

Q: These were movies?

HELBLE: They were movies on an all night movie station in Chicago. Frequently, I would be going down the hallway to our bedroom as my wife, Joan, would be getting up and going out to the kitchen to fix breakfast for our son. I'd be going to bed at that point. That was the kind of life I needed to unleash my pent-up desire for total relaxation.

However, as I said, the year was good. I focused on public administration, political theory, and a number of other courses which I have long since forgotten. I ended up needing one more course and a thesis if I wanted to get a master's degree. However, I learned during that year that I did not have any acute, intellectual bent. I really did not enjoy the work of getting into the kind of research I would have needed to do a thesis. I knew, from that year on, that I would never be interested in pursuing a Ph. D. degree. I respected those who did. I wasn't awed by them but I respected their tenacity and certain capabilities which had to be exhibited in pursuit of such a program. However, I knew that it was not my metier, and I came away with that lesson.

Q: You did not have the motivation which, I think, a number of your fellow students had. That is, if they had never done military service and were, say, in their 20's, they could avoid military service by continuing to work for an advanced degree even though, really, they didn't terribly want it. However, this was their way out of service during the Vietnam War. Unfortunately, the law made this possible. I think that it was the worst class legislation that we ever had. You, of course, didn't have the shadow of military service in Vietnam hanging over you, so that removed one motivation.

HELBLE: As I said, it was a family year to a significant extent. Our son Stuart, who had done first grade correspondence courses in Hue but suffered academically in that process,

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certainly in terms of socialization, entered second grade. After about six or eight weeks we noticed that he kept getting zeroes on papers he brought home, had written very little, and so on. Finally, Joan went to see the teacher, who said, "Look, I understand what his background is. I know what he's been doing for the last several years. What this kid needs more than anything else is 'socialization.' He talks to everybody in the class. He never pays attention to me. He's just absolutely enthralled that there are other kids around." She said, "It's all right. He'll catch up academically later. He's not really that disruptive, but it's what he needs. I'm not concerned about it." So I thought that that was an extremely broad and unusual view from a teacher and I thought that it was an accurate assessment of the situation. Sty and I went to a Chicago Cubs baseball game in the spring of 1965. I wanted him to see Wrigley Field. That night, when we got home, he had acute stomach pains. We thought that it was the hot dog that he had eaten at the game. However, the next morning he was running a fever. We took him to the doctor. The doctor said immediately, "Take him to the hospital. He has acute appendicitis." So we rushed him in, he had his surgery, and never shed a tear until I told him a joke after the operation. He laughed and almost pulled the stitches out. That brought tears to his eyes for the first time.

Later that year 1965, when I had finished my course work, we were due to leave for Washington for assignment to the Department of State. Joan was nine months pregnant, but she was going to stay and supervise the packing up of our household effects. At the last moment, on June 14, the day before I was scheduled to leave Chicago, the baby came.

Q: So the baby was born in Chicago?

HELBLE: Right. It was a difficult birth after 24 hours of labor. To some extent it was the result of damage which Joan suffered at the time of the birth of our daughter, Cindy, in Hue. Joan had less than expert medical care in that situation. In any event the baby came, a girl. This had been our hope and desire since Cindy died in Hue. So we added Ramona Helble to our family on June 14, 1965.

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Q: Then, after you finished at the University of Chicago in June, 1965, you were assigned to the Department of State?

HELBLE: That's right.

Q: Did you know that that assignment was coming up after the end of your university stint?

HELBLE: I was aware that I was being assigned to the Vietnam Working Group. So I left Chicago on June 15, the day after Ramona was born, and reported a couple of days later to the Vietnam Working Group. That began another assignment, another chapter in the story.

Q: Is there anything more that you would like to record about your time at the University of Chicago?

HELBLE: It was an exhilarating year in many respects. It was broadening and challenging. It was certainly different from active duty in the Department or overseas. It was humbling, as I had to acknowledge the tremendous range of human knowledge of which, at least in my case, I was totally unaware. [Laughter] That's always a good perspective to have instilled in you.

The assignment to the Vietnam Working Group started in late June, 1965. It ran for just about exactly two years.

Q: Say something about the organization of the Vietnam Working Group. This was an unusual arrangement in the Department, at least at the time. I had served on the Vietnam Working Group a year or two before then, in 1963 and early 1964. At that time we had about five people assigned to the Group. Paul Kattenburg was the Director. I was the Deputy Director. How was it organized during your time there?

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HELBLE: Well, when I arrived there, we had seven officers and three secretaries. As the next two years unfolded, we built up to nine officers and three secretaries. At one point during that time frame I became very incensed because for months other officers and I had been pleading to get at least some additional secretarial help. We had to do our own filing. There was a horrendous amount of telegraphic traffic and other reports coming into our office. The place was a shambles of paper. Often you couldn't find a telegraphic reference from the previous day because nothing was in any particular order. Frequently, I would spend a Saturday afternoon or a Sunday morning, just filing stuff that was related to my own work. We couldn't get help.

Q: You had a specific assignment on the desk. What was that?

HELBLE: I was working on internal political developments in Vietnam. We had an officer who was working on the political-military aspects.

Q: Who was that?

HELBLE: Chuck Flowerree. We had another officer working on the peace negotiations, which were all very hush-hush at that time, using various channels—the Poles, the Chinese Communists, and others.

Q: Who was doing that?

HELBLE: Hayward Isham did most of it. Dick Smyser was also involved in some of that. George Roberts was in charge of following Vietnamese external affairs. This frequently meant “Third Country assistance.” We were trying to encourage the European countries, the Japanese, and others to provide economic and/or military assistance to the Republic of Vietnam.

I had one assistant on my side. This was Tony Lake, who eventually became the National Security Adviser to President Clinton at the NSC [National Security Council]. Bill Marsh

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was my assistant at another stage on the internal political side. Bob Miller, or Robert H. Miller, was the Director of the Working Group. He had arrived about a week before I did. He was there throughout my two-year stint.

Q: He'd been in the Embassy in Saigon?

HELBLE: He's been the number two in the Political Section in the Embassy in Saigon from about 1962 to 1965, if I recall correctly. He was a very competent, calm officer, under whom I served later on, when he was a Deputy Assistant Secretary of State in the Bureau of East Asian Affairs, and I was Country Director for Thailand and Burma in 1976. Interestingly enough, he now works with me at the State Department as a retiree, handling requests from the public for State Department documents under the Freedom of Information program. He has become one of my closest friends.

In any event it was a pressure cauldron of the first water. The nature of the pressure was very different from what I had experienced in the field. There were constant demands from Congress, the White House, the "Seventh Floor" of the State Department, and the Pentagon.

Q: The Seventh Floor is where the Secretary and the senior officers of the Department have their offices.

HELBLE: Yes. There were also demands for information from the press and so on. There was a relentless cascade of demands, all of them urgent. Of course, we were fully aware that we were involved in a major war, with thousands of casualties accruing as the months went by.

To return to your question about organization and staffing, at one point I became increasingly incensed at the shortage of secretarial assistance. I had tried to work through Bob Miller, but nothing got done. So one day I wrote a memorandum. I made several copies of it. I said that, with 540,000 U. S. troops in Vietnam the least the State

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Department could do was to provide an adequate secretarial staff for a small office that was dealing with issues affecting those troops. The memorandum was directed to the Executive Director of the Bureau of East Asian Affairs, who was in charge of the administration of the bureau. I left a copy on Bob Miller's desk. He was not in. I left another copy with the Deputy Assistant Secretary, Leonard Unger, who was responsible for supervising our office.

This was late on a Friday afternoon. Within a half hour the proverbial fecal material hit the fan. Everybody wanted to know what I thought I was doing, "jumping channels" and this kind of thing. I made clear that my sense of outrage had reached the point where I was determined to do something. [Laughter]

Q: You'd gotten attention, anyhow.

HELBLE: On the following Monday morning we had another secretary. That was probably my greatest accomplishment during my two years on this desk because, certainly, I didn't resolve the internal political problems of Vietnam. In any event it was a very different scene from work in the field in Vietnam. It was a madhouse every day.

In the midst of all this pressure I was charged with following the internal politics of Vietnam, including the struggle for power and influence between President Nguyen van Thieu and Prime Minister Nguyen cao Ky and the machinations of the Vietnamese generals, which was a feature of Vietnam's political life during our years of association with it. There was the Buddhist influence in it, which I referred to in an earlier part of this interview in connection with my time in Hue. There was the breakdown in ARVN solidarity.

Q: ARVN was the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. HELBLE: That's right. That occurred in particular during 1966. This involved General Nguyen chanh Thi, in particular, whom we referred to earlier in connection with the abortive coup d'etat in Saigon in 1960. In 1966 General Thi was the commander of the ARVN I Corps, with his residence in Da Nang. He had the ARVN First and Second Divisions assigned to I Corps, plus ancillary units. In

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that region, of course, there was still a very strong Buddhist movement. It had become an anti-government movement. Soldiers of those divisions were largely drawn from that region. General Thi had become identified as a friend of the Buddhists. I should say that in 1965, I guess it was, the Buddhists burned down our Consulate in Hue. Anticipating this development by one day Tom Corcoran, our Consul in Hue at the time, arranged to move the office to Da Nang, where it became a Consulate General.

In any event General Thi broke with his Saigon superiors. This was a political move, but it split ARVN—not down the middle, because I Corps didn't include the mass of the troops. However, it was a pretty isolated geographic area, and General Thi wasn't taking any orders from Saigon. The Americans were in the middle with a really tough nut to crack. Of course, we were totally opposed, from the policy point of view, to the actions which General Thi was taking and the divisiveness which he was causing in this connection.

The outcome of that finally was a negotiated settlement. General Thi couldn't hold out too long. Our greatest fear was that this conflict would end up in combat between ARVN units, and there would be blood shed which would get beyond the point of no return in terms of reconciliation between the two factions. Meanwhile, the war against the Communists was going on, and we were pouring in more and more American troops. This was a terribly bad time to have such a conflict. In any event, General Thi was finally pressured into giving up his command of I Corps on a temporary basis to receive medical treatment in the United States. He had some sort of minor problem with his nose, but it was hardly something that you would leave your duty station in the midst of a war to take care of.

Q: This was a sort of excuse ...

HELBLE: It was an arrangement to get him out of Vietnam and make him comfortable here in the United States. He was treated at Walter Reed Army Hospital in Washington, DC. I was tasked with being his companion, his guide, his controller, his handler, or whatever

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you called it—once he arrived in the United States. So I set up his medical appointments. I got him lodging in a hotel.

Q: Where did he stay?

HELBLE: He stayed at a sort of apartment hotel on Connecticut Avenue at the junction with Columbia Road, North West. It was a few blocks South of Calvert Street. Joan and I had him over for dinner a number of times.

The Vietnamese Embassy in Washington, of course, didn't want to touch him with a 10 foot pole because of his political differences with Generals Thieu and Ky. The point of all of this was to keep him from feeling that he had to return to Vietnam and get back into this political tension. Finally, we kept him away long enough and made him comfortable enough that he was never a political factor again.

Q: The problem faded away. I'd like to go back to one point that you raised earlier in this interview. Shortly before you left Hue, a couple of days before that, you had learned at a dinner party which you had given in Hue, and where General Do cao Tri, then commanding general of I Corps, was present, that two North Vietnamese, from a former North Vietnamese Army unit, had been captured some 18 or 20 miles North of Hue. Did the North Vietnamese Army presence in South Vietnam build up from that point in that area?

HELBLE: Of course, I left Vietnam at that point. However, the answer is, "Yes," the North Vietnamese Army presence built up steadily throughout the country. That's why, in February, 1965, as I think we mentioned earlier, when we introduced U. S. troops, not only were those two North Vietnamese soldiers cited as justification for a change in the nature of the war which had been started by the North Vietnamese. Indeed, there was a laundry list of additional North Vietnamese Army units and personnel who had arrived in the South.

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Of course, the conflict that was going on in 1966 and 1967 with the mass of U. S. troops, including combat in the Ia Drang Valley, Khe Sanh again, and so forth, involved North Vietnamese Army troops. They weren't indigenous southern Vietnamese at all.

If I may just return to the crisis involving General Thi in I Corps, that became a major crisis. As people who knew something about the internal politics of that area, David Engel and I were tasked with providing off hour coverage of these ongoing developments in the Operations Center of the State Department. David Engel was younger than I but had also had experience on Vietnamese matters. He was working in the Bureau of Intelligence Research [INR] at the time.

This extra assignment meant that, during office hours, from about 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM, we did our regular jobs. Then one of us worked in the Operations Center throughout that night and went back to his regular job the following morning. At least I did. I'm not sure that David did. In any case, I would work all night and then go back to my daily job.

Q: Did you get any sleep at all? They had a bedroom in the Operations Center.

HELBLE: Once in a while you could get an hour's sleep, but most of the time the phone was ringing, you had to prepare two or three situation reports for the White House or send long-distance fax reports if President Johnson was down in Austin, Texas, or at his Texas ranch. We would have to collect all of the information coming in and prepare these updates perhaps twice a night. Secretary of State Dean Rusk would call personally, perhaps at 11:00 PM or midnight, and want to know what was going on.

At 7:30 AM I would go to the office of Bill Bundy, the Assistant Secretary for East Asian Affairs, and give him an early morning briefing on the situation in Vietnam, when he arrived at the Department. Then I would go to the Department cafeteria and get a bite to eat. At about 8:00 or 8:15 AM I would be at my desk and work until 8:00 or 9:00 PM that evening. Then I'd go home. I would get perhaps seven or eight hours of sleep. Then, on

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the following morning, I would start that same cycle again—all day, all night, all day. That went on for three months. It was a real test of stamina if you ever saw it.

Meanwhile, my workload on the Vietnam Working Group was not altered or lightened. It was just the normal routine. So this was a very intense experience, but it was mainly a test of endurance. During the three months or so that I was doing this I saw almost nothing of my family because this process went on through the weekends. We didn't get off on Saturday or Sunday, although we might be off during a part of those days. That was it.

Of course, the United States was engaged at that point in trying to promote political development in Vietnam. We were trying to assist the Vietnamese and the Vietnamese authorities and politicians to find some sort of identity, some sort of cohesion in the developing political situation. Once again, I think that the United States was trying to do something which I don't think we had the capacity to do. Even if you have a fairly good knowledge of a country, this is difficult to do—and we did not have enough people with that kind of knowledge about Vietnamese motivations, philosophies, and so forth.

Q: You were talking earlier about yourself and Dave Engel, switching on and off, spending nights at the Operations Center, plus your daytime work. You mentioned that there were nine officers on the desk. Couldn't some of the other people relieve you on that?

HELBLE: All I know is that the decision was made that Engel and I were considered to have an in depth understanding of the politics of Vietnam, and we were chosen to do this. It was an honor...

Q: But an honor that, in some respects, you could have done without.

HELBLE: I kept wondering about some relief, but there was never any relief. That's the way things were done in those days.

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Q: The Political Section in Saigon would be the logical place to get some additional people on the desk. How large was the Political Section at that point, say, in 1965?

HELBLE: I really don't know but I would guess that there were, perhaps, 10 officers assigned there. However, it didn't work that way. You didn't tap the field for people to come back and work in the Department. Twice, during my two-year stint on the Working Group, I was tasked to go out to Saigon and fill in for some officer in the Political Section who was going on home leave! So I went out to Saigon for two periods of three months—one in the fall of 1965 and the other in the fall of 1966.

Q: That was your rest stint.

HELBLE: Yes, that's right. You see, it was the responsibility of the Department to fill in the gaps in Saigon because Phil Habib, the Political Counselor at the time, was complaining that he couldn't get along without this or that person, who was doing such a critical job in the Political Section. So the Department would tap the desk, and off I went on those two periods of temporary duty at the Embassy. This was all right, though I wasn't anxious to do it. It kept me in touch with Saigon, at any rate.

As I said, the U. S. was pushing the democratic processes, elections, and a new constitution. I became quite involved in assisting the Embassy in Saigon, obtaining materials for them for the constitutional convention which the Vietnamese were organizing at our instigation to discuss the terms of a new constitution. We brought in a number of experts on constitutions in various countries, picked their brains, and encouraged them to prepare studies and so on. That occupied several months in the summer of 1966, as I recall.

Ultimately, a new constitution was adopted, the details of which I have long since forgotten. The constitution was unique to Vietnam but drew heavily on various other constitutional provisions around the world. It was certainly not a mirror image of the U. S.

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Constitution, in any respect, although there were several elements in the two constitutions which resembled each other.

The constitutional convention was followed by an election campaign.

Q: We were talking about your activity on the Vietnam Working Group. In addition to this, as I recall, you had the opportunity to go out and talk to all kinds of academic audiences and had varying experiences. Would you like to touch on that?

HELBLE: I had wonderful and very numerous opportunities to do this.

During that two-year period 1965-1967 on the Vietnam Working Group, excepting such things as the temporary duty details to the Embassy in Saigon and my stint in the Operations Center for three months, the rest of the time I averaged three to four speeches a week on Vietnam. Some of them were made to Foreign Service Institute classes for AID [Agency for International Development] officers training to go to Vietnam. However, most of these speeches were made in public forums. Some of them were in the Washington area. I spoke at a Unitarian Church in Rockville, MD, which Ambassador Unger was supposed to have spoken to. It was his church, but at the last moment he asked me to go out and cover for him. I found a representative of The Women's Strike for Peace movement already on the platform when I arrived at this church. She was typically knowledgeable about Vietnam, a self-styled expert, as we've mentioned before, somewhat facetiously.

I spoke to another group in Arlington, VA. I don't recall the name of the group. In any event there was an ex-POW [Prisoner of War] from the Korean War who was the other speaker. It was not until I had finished my speech, he gave his, and the questions started, that I came to realize that I was in the midst of a John Birch Society ultra-conservative group. While at least 90 percent of the groups that I spoke to were hostile, about 5 percent were objectively interested, and 5 percent involved the buzz saw of the Extreme Right.

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When I would speak to a liberal group, the question was, for example, "Why are you napalming babies?" In the Extreme Right groups the question would be, "Why aren't you bombing Haiphong or, better yet, Communist China?"

By and large the Bureau of Public Affairs in the Department did a lousy job of identifying in advance what the nature of the group was.

Q: They made the arrangements for these talks? They really set you up.

HELBLE: Yes. I was feeling set up all the time. I would run into situations where I was the only speaker. Other times, it was one against one. Or it might be a panel situation where I gave the speech and then there would be, perhaps, three panel members who spoke for 10 minutes each and critiqued or criticized what I had said.

I went to Northeastern University, to Pittsburgh, to Salt Lake City, to South Carolina, Chicago, Milwaukee, and all around the country. Usually, I would leave late in the afternoon, catch a flight that would take me to wherever I was going, and make the speech. Then, if it was possible, I would take a flight back that same night, perhaps at 11:00 PM, get home very late at night, get a few hours of sleep, and then back to the mines at the Vietnam Working Group the next morning. This, too, was pretty exhausting because the Working Group was a full time job in itself.

Q: I think that the Department has always been weak on the Public Affairs side. It tries to draw on officers at the working level to handle these issues. It really doesn't take very good care of them. Some of them should be taken off other duties for a week or a month and given time to prepare more carefully for these public appearances, so that you could get a decent night's sleep. This arrangement you had was quite unreasonable.

HELBLE: Well, I think that the Bureau of Public Affairs was not well organized at the time. Also, the circumstances were something that they had never encountered. The

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demands on the Department for speakers on Vietnam, as the period 1965-67 wore on, were enormous.

Q: I know they were. You've spoken of the other officers on the Working Group. Did they handle any of these speaking engagements?

HELBLE: Yes—at least some of them. I don't recall how much some of them did this, but I think that all of them made speeches, at least to some extent. I think that I may have been tapped more than anybody else, but all of them shared the work in that respect.

Q: During the period from 1963 to 1966 I was assigned to the Department, first on the Vietnam Working Group, then on the Indonesian desk, and finally on the Australian desk. Even after I was assigned away from Vietnam affairs, I was still asked by the Bureau of Public Affairs to handle some of these speaking assignments. I was kind of amused because my immediate supervisor when I was working on the Australian desk, Dave Cuthell, told me that he had been instructed from on high not to interfere with my going out on these speaking engagements on Vietnam. He never identified who it was, and I never really pressed him. I could handle this on the Australian desk. Cuthell used to refer to this as my social program. [Laughter] But I never tried to go out and get back on the same evening, unless it was to some place that was very close to Washington. I handled a speaking engagement in Wilmington, DE, in one evening. However, for the rest of it, I made sure that I got a night's sleep. You couldn't control this situation nearly as easily as I could. On the whole, I was struck with how poor the Department's response was to a major crisis in the public affairs field, where there was so much public interest in the subject.

HELBLE: The printed materials, the canned language for letters, and the handouts were always out of date, weak in content, and hardly persuasive. That was a problem. There were problems of Congressional demands and Congressmen not only requesting direct answers to questions which they were posing. There was a heavy flow of their constituent mail, which was simply buck slipped over to the State Department for response to the

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Congressman's office, so that he could send out the letter to his constituent. That flow was very heavy, and we had a lot of that. Frequently, the questions to the Congressmen were of such nature that they did not have the necessary expertise to answer them, and the correspondence had to be referred to the desk in the State Department to answer.

I think that the best introduction that I could have had to this particular situation happened during the first week that I was on the Vietnam Working Group. I had just come from the University of Chicago. I was told by Bob Miller, my boss, to go out to Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, which is only a journey of a little more than an hour from Chicago, to what was basically a "Civil Rights Week" set up by the Chicago civil rights community. They had decided to have a discussion on Vietnam as a second subject in that particular year 1965. So I was to go out and represent the Department on that occasion. I took a plane out to O'Hare Airport in Chicago, somebody from this civil rights camp met me, and we drove up to Lake Geneva. We had dinner, and then I went on the platform.

This was a panel situation with three other panel members. There was a professor from the University of California at Berkeley, an American Friends Service Quaker official, and the deputy chief of the Hungarian delegation to the United Nations. After I'd finished my speech and each of them spoke for a bit, I concluded that, of those three other panel members, the Hungarian was closest to my position, which was saying something.
[Laughter]

Q: May we pause for a moment.

—

Q: All right, John, you were up at Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. You may want to continue with your experience with this particular program.

HELBLE: Well, as I said, the panel critiqued me, and then the program was open for questions. The heavy artillery questions came from this audience of about 200 civil rights

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activists. Virtually all of the questions were hostile in nature to the U.S. Government, the State Department, and John Helble. On this occasion, as was often the case, somebody would say, "Well, Mr. Helble, regarding what you have said, is that the State Department position or are those your own views?" Of course, I was speaking as a State Department official. A favorite question was, "Do you really believe in all of this, yourself?" And I would say, "Sure. I'm working on the problem. I understand it."

Q: Well, Lake Geneva is close to Madison, Wisconsin, which was a big center for opposition to U. S. Government policies. In May, 1965, more or less contemporaneous with this, I appeared in a State Department program called, "Community Meetings in Foreign Policy," at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. There the hostility of the audience to our government's policy was unmistakable. There was an element of about 200 that was very tough. However, there were about 1,000 people in the audience, and I think that we got a fair hearing from the audience as a whole. When we get to it, I'll go into another experience which was quite different, about a year later. But anyway, please continue.

HELBLE: In any event the questioning went on. By now it was about 10:30 PM. The moderator, having observed that each time a question was due, a number of hands went up in the audience. He cited the example of all night sessions, called teach-in's. He said, "If it's all right with Mr. Helble," as though I had any choice under the circumstances, "...we'll just continue as long as there are any questions." I groaned to myself but bit my tongue, and we went on. The long and the short of it was that we didn't finish until 4:00 AM. Of course, I was always the target of the questions, with the panelists jumping in periodically to throw another spear in my back after a nasty question was asked by a member of the audience.

Q: Were the questions different, or were they repetitive?

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HELBLE: No, they wandered all over the place. The questions were often variations on the theme of "Why are you napalming babies?" In any event, when it was over, I went back to my quarters, which was a cabin with four bedrooms in it, one of which I occupied. There was a central livingroom. I went into my room and got into a bathrobe. I was so wrought up after my experience with this audience that I couldn't get to sleep, so I went out to the livingroom and sat down to read something. People came out of two of the bedrooms. They had been to the late show with me and they wanted to continue the discussion then.

At 5:30 AM I excused myself and said, "I've got to take a shower because I have to be in the breakfast hall by 6:30 AM." So I did that. At 6:30 AM I walked into the breakfast hall. Someone at the first table I walked past said, "Here, you come here and sit down and talk to us. We have some questions for you." The result was that I didn't have any breakfast because I was answering questions. At that point the organizer said to me, "Mr. Helble, there are so many people with so many questions. What we've decided to do is to change our morning program. We'll postpone our 8:00 AM program. We'd like you to appear again at 8:00 AM." This was right after breakfast. So I was back on stage again.

Q: Were you alone on the stage?

HELBLE: Yes. On this occasion the other panelists were no longer present.

Q: Maybe they were catching up on their sleep, which they had missed the night before.

HELBLE: Maybe. However, the principal figure at this civil rights program was Jesse Jackson. So he was placed on the stage with me. Then it became a back and forth, open ended debate between the two of us, with questions from the audience, 99 percent directed toward me. Finally, at 11:00 AM, with no break since this program began at 8:00 AM, I told the organizer that I had a 1:30 PM flight back to Washington, leaving from O'Hare Airport in Chicago. I said, "I've got to leave right now." I was finally off the hook, but

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it was the kind of experience that really conditioned me quite well for what was to follow for the next couple of years on the public speaking trail.

Q: John, one question that has always puzzled me—and I don't have any very good answer for it. You mentioned Jesse Jackson, who was on this platform with you at this morning session. Somehow, and for reasons that I have never understood, the whole question of Vietnam, in all of its manifestations, became inextricably involved with the whole issue of civil rights in the United States. There was no logic in this, because the communists were oppressing the people of South Vietnam, whom we were trying to help. This had nothing to do with the civil rights movement in the United States, except that obviously it did, in the minds of the people that were in your audience. Do you have any views on this?

HELBLER: Well, I think that there were two factors. This perception had developed through the material carried in the media, and, of course, with the Buddhist uprising in South Vietnam, the immolations of Buddhist monks, and the attention devoted to them. There was a perception that the Saigon government was authoritarian and oppressive. The U. S. Government was providing aid to the Saigon Government, and we were now taking casualties in support of it. I think that there was a perception which offended the civil rights sympathizers. More than that, I think that at the core of this issue was the view that LBJ's President Johnson's Great Society programs which he had started a year or so after President Kennedy's death were supported by the same community that the civil rights activists represented, in large measure. It was perceived that the war effort in Vietnam was detracting from the available resources to support these civil rights programs. I think that that was a factor.

Still, I would agree with you that the extent of the hostility displayed toward our Vietnam policies by the civil rights community is not fully explicable by either of those points I just made.

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Q: Later on, I ran into a curious experience in terms of the situation in Israel and its difficulties with its Arab neighbors. A prominent American Jewish leader visited Canberra, Australia, when I was there in the early 1970's. He was talking about the Vietnam War, which was still going on, although it was toward the end of this period. He said, to the extent that the United States spends resources on Vietnam it is less likely to be in a position to help Israel if Israel should be under attack. He made that point very explicitly. I don't think that he cared anything about the merits of the Vietnam War, as such. He cared about the impact our efforts might have on U. S. aid to Israel in case of need. I hadn't thought about this aspect previously. I think that what you say has a lot to it, but there still is something more to it than that. Here's something for one of those busy, Ph. D. candidates to study carefully.

HELBLE: Going back briefly to my time following internal political developments in Vietnam, one or another of the tasks which I received on the Vietnam desk related to the efforts to develop democratic processes and a culture of democracy in Vietnam. For example, there was the assignment of General Ed Lansdale to Vietnam.

Lansdale, of course, was the renowned hero, if you will, of the book, *The Ugly American*. The name of the character in the novel assigned to him was Col Hillandale, but many people associated this character with Ed Lansdale. Lansdale was sent out to Vietnam to work on all kinds of crazy projects which he dreamed up. They were indeed crazy. He was working with music, poetry, and other groups in Vietnam, trying to develop democratic, political instincts and some sort of political motivation in Vietnamese society and culture. Various innocent, senior American officials thought that this was something that was going to turn the tide in Vietnam. I was assigned as his Washington backup. However, essentially he communicated directly to people at very senior levels. My job was to get the resources to back him up on the various activities and projects he dreamed up.

All of these projects were absolute examples of pie in the sky. He didn't know what he was doing and he wasn't doing anything that was relevant or useful. However, he had a

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marvelous facility for self-promotion. He wrote one extensive report after another about the great success of some musical group that he had persuaded to get together and sing patriotic, Vietnamese songs, write stirring prose or poetry, or whatever.

Q: He was in Vietnam for most of this time, wasn't he?

HELBLE: I think that General Lansdale went to Vietnam in 1966, although he had been there much earlier, in the 1950's. It could have been in late 1965—I've forgotten exactly. In any event, he was just a footnote on the things that we were doing in Vietnam. Essentially, Lansdale was a joke, as far as I was concerned. It was an ego trip for Lansdale but it was another sign of how desperate we were to get things going, develop some political motivation, and so forth. Again, we were working essentially in an abyss of ignorance about Vietnamese thought processes, how they interrelated, and so on. We never grasped their mentality, and Lansdale was certainly not attuned to it in any sense, despite his self-promotion.

In February, 1967, we had a massive snowstorm in the Washington area. In fact, for all intents and purposes the U. S. Government was virtually closed down for three days. I lived in Falls Church, VA. I could not get out of my street and get to the office. On the third morning after the storm our furnace went out, and the house started to chill down. I was able to get out that day and I went off to work. It was a Friday. Late that afternoon, at about 4:30 PM, I was briefing a Dutch Parliamentarian in my office at the Department. I had called home a couple of times and learned that the furnace repairman hadn't come yet. Joan was in the kitchen with the two children, with the gas burners on, trying to stay warm. I had my heaviest wool suit on. At about 4:30 PM I got a phone call, interrupting my briefing of the Dutch Parliamentarian. I was told that in 30 minutes a car would arrive at the front entrance of the State Department to pick me up to go to Andrews Air Force Base, where I would catch an Air Force plane going to Honolulu. Of course, I said, "What for?" I was told that it was very hush-hush, but President Johnson had decided to meet with President

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Thieu and Prime Minister Ky of Vietnam in Honolulu, together with their cabinet, on the following day, Saturday.

This was the first I'd heard about it. My boss, Bob Miller, hadn't heard anything about it. We were just working on Vietnam, and this dropped down out of the blue. So I called home and asked Joan if the furnace was working yet. She said, "No, they're not here yet." I said, "Well, that does it. I'm going to Honolulu." [Laughter] She thought that I was kidding. I said, "Well, the car's down here at the State Department. I don't know how you're going to make arrangements. You've got a spare key to the car and somehow you'll have to get down to the State Department and pick up the car. I'm leaving at 5:00 PM for Andrews Air Force Base."

So I did, in my heavy wool suit, was put on this Air Force plane with other, lower level, working type officials, and left for Honolulu. I tried to find out why I was being assigned to this duty. Nobody on the plane could answer the question. We got into Honolulu. On the next morning I asked again what I was doing there. Finally, somebody said at that point that President Johnson was arriving in Honolulu early that afternoon, and Thieu and Ky were due late that Saturday afternoon, with their party. I was told that my job would be to serve as liaison between the U. S. Secret Service and the security people who would be accompanying the Thieu-Ky party.

Q: At this point Thieu was the President...

HELBLE: And Ky was the Prime Minister. By this time the dimensions of the representation from the two sides had become enormous. Not only was President Johnson coming but Vice President Humphrey, Secretary of State Rusk, Secretary of Defense McNamara, and the Secretaries of Agriculture and of Housing and Urban Development, or whatever it was known at that time, as well. And all of their counterparts were coming from Vietnam—not the Vice President of Vietnam, but the Prime Minister. The top generals on both sides were to be present. Senior officials came from the U. S. Embassy in Saigon,

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including our military people. It was the greatest assembly of high ranking officials that I ever saw in one place.

Q: Who was the American Ambassador in Saigon then?

HELBLE: The Ambassador was Ellsworth Bunker. In any event the Vietnamese party arrived at around 5:00 or 5:30 PM on the Saturday afternoon. I had tried to help the Protocol people arrange the motorcade, because nobody had done any advance planning, nobody knew what the relative ranks of the Vietnamese were, and so on. I was the closest thing to an authority there but I had to guess on some of them. I saw that nobody was assisting the Vietnamese Foreign Minister to his car, so I went up to him and told him that I knew where his car was and said, "Let me take you to it."

Q: Who was this?

HELBLE: Mau, I believe. As you know, Vietnamese Foreign Ministers were never very high profile figures. While I was walking with the Vietnamese Foreign Minister, I heard my name called, and there was the U. S. Presidential limousine. Some Secret Service guy was gesturing to me and saying, "Come over here." He and he pushed me into the car, where I found myself sitting on a jump seat, opposite President Johnson! Thieu and Ky were already in the car. On the other jump seat was Governor Burns of Hawaii. I said, "What am I doing here?" I was told, "You're to interpret." I was stunned. It had been almost two years since I had actively used my Vietnamese to any extent. In any event, there was nothing to be done but to struggle on through it.

So the conversation in the car started off with President Johnson saying, "Tell the President and Prime Minister that I am delighted to have them here." Well, I could handle that. Incidentally, when I got in the car President Thieu recognized me. We had met each other when I arrived in Hue in 1961. At the time he was the commanding general of the ARVN First Division. I had last seen him in 1964 at a cocktail party when I was leaving Vietnam. He was the Chairman of the Joint General Staff at that time and totally

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ignored by everybody at this cocktail party because this was a pretty meaningless position, even though it had a fancy title. The conversation went on in a very stilted fashion, with long pauses. Then President Johnson thought that he would pull out his Texas charm. He slapped me on the knee and said, "You tell the President that I've got to go back to Washington on Monday, but I want them to stay here, be my guest, and enjoy Honolulu and the beaches for as long as they want to stay." Then he slapped me some more on the knee.

So I told Thieu and Ky that. They looked at each other with a very puzzled expression on their faces. They were clearly not at ease.

Q: With each other, I suppose.

HELBLE: No, with the situation. Yes, they were not the best of friends. However, both of them had only learned on Thursday night, Washington time—Friday, Saigon time—that they were to turn up with all of their officials in Honolulu.

Q: They were summoned to Honolulu.

HELBLE: They were summoned to Honolulu. President Johnson had only made this decision on Thursday night, Washington time. Here it was late afternoon on Saturday in Honolulu. This is not the way Presidential trips and summit meetings are arranged, as every Foreign Service Officer knows. In any event, Thieu and Ky didn't know why they were there. Quite frankly, I believe that they thought that maybe they were going to be fired, that Lyndon Johnson was going to tell them that it was time for General Somebody or Other to take over, or whatever. [Laughter] They really were uneasy and totally befuddled as to what was going on. They didn't respond to President Johnson in any specific way to the invitation to stay on in Honolulu. They just said, "Thank you."

Q: They just said, "Chung toi phai ve Vietnam"—We have to return home.

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HELBLE: Right. Then there was a long pause. Finally, Thieu looked at me and said something to me personally and directly in Vietnamese. He asked me how my family and my wife were. He explained in Vietnamese to Ky how we had known each other, because I did not know Ky. Then we exchanged a few other, personal comments.

Q: At this point, had LBJ left the car?

HELBLE: No. We were driving into Honolulu from the airport. I finally had to say to Thieu that I would have to explain to President Johnson what we had been talking about, because several minutes had gone by while we were going back and forth in Vietnamese. President Johnson wasn't clued in as to what was going on, so I told him that we were renewing old acquaintances. He wasn't much interested in this and so we talked a little bit more. Thieu and Ky became a little bit more relaxed. Governor Burns, of course, never said anything during the entire ride into Honolulu.

The conversation on personal subjects flowed a little bit more smoothly after the ice was broken, but there was nothing of substance transacted during the course of that 25 or 30 minute ride in from the airport. But I felt something like sheer terror to have been thrown into this situation without any preparation. Then, of course, as soon as I got to the hotel where we were staying, I went around and tried to find somebody who could tell me what was expected of me, since the conference on the next day Sunday was going to be a very intensive, all-day meeting covering the full range of economic and political developments, military affairs, assistance programs, agricultural activities, and so forth. I wondered who was going to interpret for this program. I was, of course, just horrified to think that I might be expected to do that. I was thinking of jumping into the first outrigger canoe and paddling out to one of the outer Hawaiian islands immediately, if they expected me to do simultaneous translations in a conference setting over a range of detailed, technical topics. I was certainly not up to that. Nobody could answer the question about translation arrangements.

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Q: They might not have thought about it, John. That's the long and the short of it.

HELBLE: That's very possible. So the next morning I went to the conference. I thought, "What am I doing here? I don't have to be here." The only thing that I found in the way of a Vietnamese security officer to interface with was one major on President Thieu's personal staff, who was responsible for his personal security. That constituted the entire security apparatus for the Vietnamese delegation—at least that the Vietnamese had brought. There was nothing to liaison about, for all intents and purposes, as I was supposed to be doing. That is, liaising between the two security services.

So there really wasn't much to do, from that point of view. I helped the protocol people and chipped in wherever I thought I could be of some value.

Q: Did you attend the meeting?

HELBLE: I attended the meeting, but I thought, "Why am I here? If they grab me and throw me up there in the translation booth, I'm a 'goner.'" In any event, at the last moment I found out that the White House had brought in a couple of people from the Office of Language Services in the State Department. They were French speakers.

Q: They were going to interpret from French to English and vice versa.

HELBLE: Right, and this worked out. So I was let off the hook. Well, here was this enormous show of American support, at which hundreds of millions of dollars worth of aid programs, more military effort, and so forth, were discussed, all of it on the spur of the moment. Thieu and Ky did not stay on in Hawaii. President Johnson left Hawaii on the Monday morning, and I believe that the Vietnamese party left for Vietnam on Monday afternoon.

Q: How did they travel? Did they go commercially, or...

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HELBLE: They had an Air Vietnam aircraft. I'm sure that it was chartered by the Vietnamese Government. As I say, the Vietnamese Delegation was very large. They had all of the members of their cabinet and their principal military leaders, as well as Thieu and Ky.

Q: Well, this simply illustrates the point that you made earlier on, that we never were really serious about Vietnam in so many ways. It's amazing.

HELBLE: And the bottom line was that, as far as I could tell, it didn't change a single thing. It was a great show. Then, of course, Vice President Humphrey, Secretary of State Rusk, and Secretary of Defense McNamara were dispatched to the far corners of East Asia to explain what went on at this meeting and to try to pump up more assistance.

Q: What about the furnace at your house? Was that fixed?

HELBLE: Well, at one point I called Joan after I'd been in Honolulu six or eight hours. I told her that I had made the trip safely. I asked if the furnace had been repaired, and she said, "Yes." I said, "Well, it may go out again, so I'm going to stay for a while." I stayed for two days after the conference was over and after the Vietnamese Delegation had left. I didn't return to Washington until the following Wednesday. By that time, of course, and in fact it was on the first morning after I arrived in Honolulu, I had bought a light weight summer sport coat and slacks, which was my wardrobe. I also bought a toothbrush and a couple of other things. I got out of that heavy weight, wool suit within hours after arriving in Honolulu.

That was one vignette and an interesting experience. However, as I say, I doubt that this meeting had any lasting significance in substantive terms.

Q: I'm afraid that there were lots of cases like that.

HELBLE: It was a big show, a lot of dough was spent, but there was no good, bottom line.

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Well, I think I've finished what I can recall from that two year stint on the Vietnam Working Group, from 1965 to 1967. I finished this assignment, still hopeful that U. S. troops could somehow find the handle with which to deal militarily and politically with the conflict in which they were engaged. I was not optimistic but I was hopeful that some good would come out of this and that this huge effort would eventually pay off. But I certainly didn't see a great deal of evidence that the North Vietnamese effort was sagging, that the U. S. bombing campaign of North Vietnam, which was in full swing at that point...

Q: That began, if I recall correctly, in about February, 1965...

HELBLE: That's correct, and it was mid 1967 when I left the Vietnam Working Group. I couldn't see that that was creating any meaningful, morale problems for the North Vietnamese, despite the evidence of what I thought were poorly founded, intelligence reports to the contrary. Certainly, the bombing campaign wasn't affecting the flow of their logistics, as far as we could tell, down the famed Ho Chi Minh Trail. The Vietnamese Communist forces were still very combat worthy. There were instances, in certain areas, that some limited progress had occurred in what was known as pacification. However, given the level of commitment and the casualties that we had taken, in such dramatic battles as that in the Ia Drang Valley and, on a daily basis, in other, smaller conflicts, it was difficult to see what real progress was being made. But there were great body counts that showed that we must be making progress. The body counts were very suspect, as we all knew.

Q: Well, I think that we did kill an awful lot of North Vietnamese.

HELBLE: We killed a lot of people, including a lot of North Vietnamese. However, one thing was evident, and had always been evident. That is, the North Vietnamese had a very determined, well organized, basically highly motivated group of troops at their disposal. They put up with a hell of a lot and endured a hell of a lot. Ultimately, of course, they prevailed. We had to learn the hard way. Still, to this day, I go back to what I said earlier

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in this interview, and I thought that this point was still valid at that point. That is, if you couldn't get the South Vietnamese Army and Vietnamese politics up to snuff, we were not going to be able to do it.

Q: Certainly, it was their war to win. It was their country. We could help them substantially and we did so. However, we could do no more than provide them with military and economic assistance, which was not very decisive, in many respects.

HELBLE: We were never able to ensure a coherent, cohesive, motivated political effort.

—

Q: John, you were giving some general impressions of your time in Vietnam, as seen from the Vietnam Working Group, as well as your previous time in Saigon and Hue. What came next after that? You were still in Washington.

HELBLE: At that point, in mid 1967, it was clear that anti-war sentiment in the United States was growing. Still, major elements of the media, such as The New York Times and the Washington Post continued editorially and otherwise to back the U. S. effort in Vietnam. They were not critical of our efforts in policy terms. They backed our policy. However, it was evident in mid-1967 that widespread questioning of the war was becoming more acute. It was fed, as we've alluded to several times earlier, by several years of nightly TV news programs of live action, U. S. casualties, political disturbances in Saigon, and other developments which clearly confused our people.

The audiences to which I had been speaking over the previous two years certainly revealed some of the more angry discontent. I must confess that few things in my life have stunned me as much as the announcement on March 29, 1968, by President Johnson that he would not be a candidate for reelection. This was simply an old politician, if you will, recognizing that he had gotten himself into such a box on one issue, Vietnam. He could not win it and he could not extract the United States from it. He was going to be defeated.

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Q: Do you really think that he would have been defeated in the 1968 elections?

HELBLE: I didn't think so at the time, but that was his conclusion, and I would honor his judgment of his prospects, more than my estimate of them. But the announcement was absolutely stunning to me.

Q: It certainly was. I was in the Embassy in Saigon at the time. We heard it and we just couldn't believe it. I felt that he had abandoned Vietnam. He had ratted on us. That was and still is my view. I think that his problem was that he came into office really intending to carry on the war against poverty. He really meant that. He was quite sincere about that. He did quite a lot. Of course, he also set us on a course in terms of programs which have almost bankrupted us. He regarded Vietnam as a distraction. It was not a distraction. It had its own momentum, causes, and concerns. Your mention of that meeting in Honolulu is simply a further example of how unserious he was in dealing with it.

HELBLE: It was a window-dressing occasion. That concludes my observations after two years in the Washington end of the Vietnam pressure cooker.

In July, 1967, I went on to my next assignment, which had been arranged in consultation with me by my old friend, Bob Dillon, with whom I had served at the Consulate in Puerto La Cruz, Venezuela. He had been a personnel counselor, was leaving that job, and he talked me into an assignment there for one year, which was not customary. They generally insisted on two years, but he convinced the personnel people to take me for one year. He thought that it would be a good opportunity for me and a good insight into something else in the Foreign Service.

So I agreed to do that and I never regretted it. It wasn't the most exciting of assignments, but it was certainly extremely educational in an area about which I knew virtually nothing. That is, how the Department of State personnel system operates and why it operates the way it does, poorly or otherwise. My job was to serve as career counselor to about

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600 Class 5 Foreign Service Officers in the old numerical ranking system prior to 1980. They were specialists or had been designated to serve in the so-called Political Cone, as opposed to administrative, economic, or consular Cones.

Q: Cones were areas of specialization.

HELBLE: Functional specialization. I learned how assignments were made. I learned a great deal about what the expectations of officers were for their careers. I learned even more about what the realities were for most officers in the future. In other words, the expectations were not going to be met by the realities.

Q: I remember your saying to me at one point, John, that when an opening occurs for a given job in an Embassy somewhere, theoretically you can get all kinds of people assigned to that. However, in reality, there are only about two or three possible people who can be put in that job for a variety of reasons. I think that you also mentioned that from the other point of view, from the officer's point of view, he may think that he can go anywhere in the world. However, in fact, there are only a couple of places he can go to. Maybe you could speak further to this point.

HELBLE: Yes, as a matter of fact, one of the projects that was started shortly after I got into Personnel was to develop a process of career planning at the FSO-5 level. As the counselor for each of my 600 or so officers, I had to take their personnel files and various wish lists that they had submitted, read about their language backgrounds and so forth, and develop a theoretical—ideal, if you will—scenario for a succession of assignments over a 10 year period from the point where I started. This was kind of a laborious, tedious process. In effect, it was an exercise in futility, because you might do this from the point of view of the ideal development of the officer's career, but you would come up against the realities very quickly.

For example, during that year, I had drafted 600 of these programs. Whenever an officer would come in for a counseling session, I would go over this program I had prepared

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and, perhaps, make some adjustments. At the time and in terms of these assignments Yugoslavia was not considered to be in Western Europe. From the point of view of my contributing to the assignment process, Yugoslavia was slightly different from Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, or the Soviet Union. However, there was one position in Yugoslavia that was becoming vacant the following summer which was the closest thing to being in Western Europe. That was in Sarajevo. The officer who filled that position would need to be language qualified in Serbo-Croatian. I went through my file to determine which were coming up for reassignment among my FSO-5 Political Officers that following summer.

Q: You mean the summer of 1968?

HELBLE: That's correct. Some 74 officers had on their theoretical, career development schedule a Western European assignment. There was one position available to be filled in this category if you counted Sarajevo as being a Western European assignment, in terms of grade and functional specialization that summer. This tells you how absolutely fruitless it had been to prepare these projections. In any event, a very good officer, Harry Dunlop, whom you know, received the assignment and became, indeed, quite a specialist in Serbo-Croatian affairs.

Q: John, I don't know if this is the time to go into it, but I recall your telling me about your counseling Richard Holbrooke. Maybe you don't want to go into it, but, after all, this was a real experience, it was true, and I think you told him like it is. Go ahead with it.

HELBLE: Well, I don't mind talking about it. Holbrooke certainly aspires to being the next Secretary of State, and it's not outside the realm of possibility that he may in fact be the next Secretary of State. So my future in the State Department may be very limited if I tell this story, but I don't care.

I had officers come in for a counseling session when they were on home leave or when they were assigned to the Department of State in Washington. They were concerned over

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their rate of promotion or their next assignment—whatever it might be. Most of the FSO-5's in the political cone had somewhere between five and eight years' experience at that point.

One of these officers was Tony Lake, who was in my flock. I referred to him previously, of course, since he had worked for me. He had certainly received good evaluation reports from me. Tony came in for a counseling session. Several days later I was at Tony's house for dinner, and one of the other guests was Richard Holbrooke, whom I knew somewhat but not as well as Tony Lake. Tony and Holbrooke were very close friends at that time—not so much any more, if the media are to be believed. On the occasion of this dinner at his home, Lake called Holbrooke over for a discussion with me and said, “Dick, you have got to go in for a counseling session with Helble. I had a session this week, and it was 'terrific.' I really learned a lot, and it was very useful.” “Oh,” Dick replied, “I don't think that's necessary for me,” and so forth. Tony was insistent. So Dick made an appointment and came in to see me a week or so later.

As I always did in these sessions. I reviewed Holbrooke's personnel file and his evaluation reports since he'd joined the Foreign Service. As usual, I was looking for patterns on how these reports read. Frequently, at such sessions, there was no clear cut pattern. Most reports read quite well, but some of them, obviously, were better than others. Sometimes you would find very critical reports. However, usually in an officer's file who had six or seven years' experience there might be one or possibly two reports which were critical or possibly critical. —

I had read Holbrooke's personnel file and I concluded that he was having what we somewhat euphemistically used to call inter-personal relationship problems. Bluntly stated, he had problems getting along with a lot of people—peers, subordinates, and even superiors. I knew enough about Dick that I wasn't terribly surprised. He was very brash, very arrogant, and rough on people. He tended to display a superior attitude toward others.

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So, of course, it was my responsibility to call this to his attention and tell him that his attitude was going to affect adversely his career development and his rate of promotion, if he didn't do something about this. So I started down that course in the interview. After I had made clear the direction in which I was headed in counseling him, I was promptly interrupted with an abrupt comment, "I'm not here for that. I'm not interested in that. That's not why I'm here. I just want to know what my promotion rate is going to be."

I tried to explain to him quietly that, at the rate he was going, his promotion rate would be slowing down as these personal traits became increasingly well known and as promotion boards read files which contained a consistent pattern of these negative traits. At that point I had probably been on the job in Personnel for eight or nine months. I had not seen more than one or two files that looked nearly as derogatory, consistently bringing out the same negative traits, as did Holbrooke's file. In any event, every time that I tried to explain that he was going to have to change his behavioral pattern, he was increasingly incensed. Finally, he read me the riot act, so I clammed up and let him go on. He said, "I want to know at what age I can expect to be an FSO-1," which was nearly the senior grade in the Foreign Service, just short of Career Minister or Career Ambassador—of which there were very few. I explained to him that it was my honest opinion that he would never reach the FSO-1 level, unless he modified his behavior. Again, I got another stern lecture to the effect that I did not understand his magnificent capabilities. So I asked him, "At what age do you think you should be an FSO-1?" He was 28 years old, at that time. He said, "35." I suppressed my instinct to snicker and pointed out to him that our mutual friend, Bob Miller, whom I referred to previously, had become an FSO-1 at the age of 40 and, at that time, was the youngest FSO-1 in the entire history of the Foreign Service. I said, "I certainly cannot see you duplicating Miller's record. I have to go back again to the proposition that you're not going to get more than a couple of grades higher, at the rate you're being written up in your evaluation reports."

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Well, he thought that I obviously didn't know anything about his unusual capabilities. So I finally said, "Dick, look, what is very clear to me is that the Foreign Service has a certain set of expectations from you. It expects you to perform in certain ways. You have a certain set of expectations out of the Service and you expect to be promoted at an extraordinarily rapid rate." I said, "It's clear to me that the twain shall never meet, that neither set of expectations will be met here. I am aware that you would like to be a senior policy maker in the foreign affairs field. My suggestion to you is that you strongly consider resigning from the Foreign Service and taking an alternate route to senior policy making. That could be through academia, business, or politics. All of these routes have been used in other circumstances. However, you're not going to make it through the career Foreign Service, in my humble judgment."

He was pretty incensed and eventually left my office very unhappy. It didn't leave me particularly happy, either, but there it was.

Q: You had never had a meeting like this before?

HELBLER: No. Never. It was an extraordinary session. I had had counseling sessions where I had had to call problems to people's attention, and they reacted poorly. However, never with the perception on their part that they should be a senior officer in the top ranks of the Foreign Service in the next half dozen years.

In any event he specifically said that he should be an FSO-1 by age 35 and should be an Assistant Secretary by that time. I didn't think much more about this interview, although the incident always stuck in my mind, of course, because it was a very unusual one.

About a year and one half later, Dick Holbrooke did resign from the Foreign Service. He went on to other things. He did a stint as a Peace Corps mission director in Morocco, I believe it was, if I recall it correctly. Then he became an editor of Foreign Policy magazine,

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a publication which, in some respects, was modeled after Foreign Affairs quarterly, the preeminent journal of its type at that time.

Q: It still is.

HELBLER: Dick did an extremely good job in promoting Foreign Policy magazine. Indeed, it became a competitor of Foreign Affairs. He gained enough recognition that, ultimately, in December, 1975, when the presidential elections of 1976 were “ginning up,” he became an adviser to the campaign of Jimmy Carter. There was a list, as I recall of 13 Democratic nominees competing for the nomination for President for the Democratic Party. Number 13 on that list was Jimmy Carter, who had been Governor of Georgia. Carter did not have any particular contacts with foreign policy advisers in the Washington arena. Through Dr. Peter Bourne, who later became the Drug Adviser for Carter in the White House, and who knew Holbrooke, or Lake, or both of them, Tony Lake and Richard Holbrooke became foreign policy advisers to the Carter campaign.

Of course, the rest is history. Carter was elected. In December, 1975, Lake and Holbrooke signed on board as advisers to Jimmy Carter. By the late spring of 1976 both Lake and Holbrooke came in to see Phil Habib, who was my boss then as Assistant Secretary for East Asian Affairs. They asked him what jobs they should take in the State Department when Carter won the elections. Carter, of course, was a long way from being elected at that stage, but he was running against a very much weakened President Gerry in the post-Watergate period.

There, again, was another example of arrogance, because they would just come in and talk about future jobs. Holbrooke said that he thought he'd take the job as Director of Policy Planning in the State Department, and Lake thought that he'd take the position of Assistant Secretary for East Asian Affairs. As it turned out, they switched jobs and reversed that. However, at age 35 Richard Holbrooke became Assistant Secretary for East

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Asian Affairs, defying all the odds. He did it in the way I told him he could do it. I never thought that he'd get that far.

Q: I've often thought that you were responsible for that! It's all your fault!

HELBLE: It's all my fault. Sorry about that. [Laughter] In any event...

Q: Your advice was good.

HELBLE: Clearly. It was my greatest success story as a Personnel Counselor.

The year as a Personnel Counselor was certainly an eye opener to me. Not only in terms of the Holbrooke case, but in general, the expectations of officers far exceeded the opportunities that would be available to them in the Foreign Service in terms of promotions and senior positions over the long run. One could see, in reading the files, that there were about five percent that were going to be outstanding officers and would succeed, regardless of what their assignments were. I recall John Negroponte's file, for example. It was clear that he was a superior officer who would succeed. On the other hand there were about five percent of the officers who, from a reading of their files, just didn't have it.

Q: They were losers.

HELBLE: With the other 90 percent of us a lot would depend on whom you get as a boss, the right job, the right timing, and a little luck with the Promotion Boards. Beyond knowledge as to how the personnel system operates and what the realities were, I came away with the personal conclusion that I was no longer really interested in focusing on my career advancement, on my promotions, and ultimately on any opportunity to be an Ambassador. I suppose that, instinctively, I did not want the disappointment that would almost certainly accompany the level of ambition that I felt at the time and that most of those officers felt whom I was talking to and interviewing. I wanted to disengage from that track and that ladder grasping outlook. From then on I just had the desire to do as good a

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job as I could in each job I had, to enjoy it, and not to be at all concerned whether I arrived at some destination or another.

Q: When did you leave Personnel?

HELBLE: In mid-1968, I went on to language training, once again. This time it was the Indonesian language, another language with which you have a more than passing facility and knowledge. My Indonesian language training was something of a misnomer in the sense that I was placed with five officers who were going to Indonesia, but I was going to Malaysia. However, as you well know, Tom, the two languages are, for all intents and purposes, the same, with occasional vocabulary differences peculiar to Malaysia—words which are not used in Indonesia, and vice versa. It was not practical to have a tutor for one student going to Malaysia, and another tutor for five students who were going to Indonesia. This arrangement was fine with me.

This was a five-month course. I entered it in September, 1968.

Q: That was at the Foreign Service Institute?

HELBLE: Yes. It was another one of these endurance tests in the sense of plugging away, six hours a day of class, with an hour or more on the language tapes most days, and then studying vocabulary at home. In the class we had one superior language student, who was miles ahead from the first day. I knew of his linguistic facility, as you did, from our Vietnam days. This was Dave Lambertson.

Q: Really? I didn't know that he had taken the Indonesian course.

HELBLE: Dave, of course, was a superb speaker of Vietnamese.

Q: Yes, he was.

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HELBLE: So I knew how easily languages came to him and how well he did with them. Indonesian, of course, is a considerably easier language than Vietnamese.

Q: I would say so.

HELBLE: But no language is really easy. Let's make that clear. I recall that, having started class on a Monday, by Friday Lambertson was asked by the tutor to give a five-minute speech in Indonesian, which he did, without a single note, and fluently. Of course, none of us could follow his speech except the tutor and the linguist. It was unbelievable, because he had not studied Indonesian before the first day of that week. And he gave a five-minute speech! I wasn't exactly awestruck. I was just terribly impressed. The others were stunned and awestruck, because they didn't know about his linguistic facility.

Indonesian was the fourth foreign language that I had studied, including a few months of early morning French, which I never really used. It is now quite dormant. I presume it is still back there, in terms of occasional words and phrases. From my point of view it's helpful. I decided that after that Indonesian course that was enough language training in my career.

I finished the Indonesian course toward the end of February.

Q: What year was that?

HELBLE: 1969. I arrived in Kuala Lumpur, where I was assigned as chief of the Political Section in the Embassy there. There were three officers and two secretaries in the section, beside myself. *Q: Who was the Ambassador?*

HELBLE: The Ambassador was James Bell, who was coming to the end of five years as Ambassador to Malaysia. He was replaced several months later by Jack Lydman. I'll talk about both of them in a few minutes.

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Q: John, you were saying that you wanted to touch on a number of additional points regarding Malaysia. Why don't you go ahead, then?

HELBLE: On May 11, 1969, if I recall correctly, a few weeks after my arrival in Kuala Lumpur, very important national elections were scheduled to be held. There was no question as to who would win the elections and retain control of the government. That was the a multiracial coalition led by Tunku Abdul Rahman. This included Malay, Chinese, and Indian parties.

Q: I think that the coalition was called the "Barisan Nasional" [National Front]. I still have some familiarity with this because from time to time I do translations of articles from the Malay press into English for FBIS [Foreign Broadcast Information Service].

HELBLE: Well, the issue was whether the ruling coalition government could obtain a two-thirds majority of the seats in Parliament, which was their objective. This would then permit them to amend the constitution in any way they wanted. The Opposition, primarily the Chinese parties, was determined to prevent them from achieving that objective.

There was an ultranationalist, Malay party that was running against the coalition. There were strong, Chinese-dominated parties in the Opposition which, in particular, included the Democratic Action Party, the DAP, which was a spin-off from Lee Kuan Yew's PAP [People's Action Party] in Singapore.

During the first five weeks that I was in the country, in my job as chief of the Political Section, I was focused primarily on this upcoming election, as was my entire staff. One of my officers was a Malay speaker. Another member of the Political Section was a Chinese speaker. They worked their respective clientele. I got to know people from the various factions in those groups. Phil Gill was the Malay speaker, and Joe Moyle was the Chinese language officer.

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As I said earlier, Ambassador Bell had been there about five years and was approaching the end of his tour of duty.

The election occurred, but the governing coalition fell short of a two-thirds majority in Parliament, although they got about 60 percent of the seats. Nevertheless, the Opposition — primarily the Chinese parties — claimed “victory.” The day following the elections, May 12, 1969, they paraded in a large caravan through the streets of Kuala Lumpur, going past a couple of downtown, Malay kampongs, or residential areas. Kampongs were little villages within the city proper which were entirely populated by Malays. The parade was very loud and noisy. Those taking part were tooting horns. They were essentially youths, waving their party flags, and so on.

From this demonstration came rumors, which were widely accepted and which spread like wildfire through the Malay community, that some of the Chinese youths had not only made racial or religious insults at the Malays but had thrown pieces of pork on the front porches of Malay homes. Eating pork is prohibited to Muslims, although many Malays eat some from time to time, though they don't admit it. This display was very offensive to the Malays, who even believed that some of the Chinese youths had exposed their private parts to Malay girls living in these kampongs. These rumors were not believed by all Malays, but they gained a great deal of currency and aroused an emotional furor in the Malay community during the next 24 hours.

We then had a first class example of that old Malay word, amok and its meaning. In point of fact amok loosely means “to go crazy” or “to see red.” Someone who is “amok” no longer uses any logic. You just run around in an uninhibited fashion, wreaking mayhem, which is frequently associated with amok. However, as I say, that didn't happen immediately. It developed during the following 24 hours.

On the afternoon of May 13, 1969, the day after the Chinese victory celebrations, the Country Team at the Embassy met with Ambassador Bell to discuss the situation and

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to get abreast of what other people in the Embassy knew, including the intelligence community and so on. It was concluded that the Malaysian Government was well aware of the sensitivities of the situation, knew enough about it, and would be able to maintain control. It was felt that nothing serious was going to happen, at least in the very near future.

Of course, I had only been in Kuala Lumpur for five weeks and didn't have any profound insights to offer. However, I suspected that, indeed, there might be more to this situation than we had anticipated. After the Country Team meeting I went back to my office and asked one of our two secretaries who lived close to the Embassy if she was going to be home that evening. She said, "Yes." I said, "Well, I'd appreciate it if you'd stay at home in case I have to call you to come into the Embassy." Then I discussed the situation with a communicator who also lived near the Embassy. He said that he'd be at home but would be on call. Then I talked to Phil Gill and a junior officer, Barbara Schrage. They were free, so I suggested that we go out for dinner at a nearby hotel. I phoned home and told Joan that I was not going to come home for the time being, as I suspected that there might be trouble of some sort.

So the three of us went to dinner at the Federal Hotel, which was, perhaps, six or eight blocks from the Embassy. There was a revolving restaurant on the roof of the hotel. We had ordered a drink and placed our orders for dinner. As the restaurant, with its magnificent view of that section of Kuala Lumpur, rotated on the top, we could see down in the alleys of the neighborhood a number of Police Federal Reserve trucks which were characteristically fire engine red, with blue uniformed, Federal Reserve troops aboard. They were essentially riot control elements. So we speculated that somebody else thought that there might be trouble that night, because this was not the normal pattern.

At about 7:20 PM, before we had been served our dinners, the loudspeaker on the hotel circuit announced that a curfew had just been imposed by the government, which would go into effect at 7:30 PM, and that any non-residents of the hotel should leave immediately.

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We dashed downstairs, caught the last cab that we could see in front of the hotel, and returned to the Embassy.

As we approached the Embassy, we noticed that the road was blocked by a very large group of people, who were non Malays and who seemed to be in something of an agitated state. We got out of the cab and walked the last half block to the Embassy. At that point we realized that, almost directly in front of the Embassy was another large group, separated perhaps 50-75 yards from the first group we had seen. The second group was composed of Malays. We were able to get into the Embassy building without any trouble and went up to the 12th floor, where our offices were. Shortly thereafter, the two mobs in front of the Embassy appeared to collide in hand to hand combat, beating each other a bit and throwing rocks. From our vantage point on the 12th floor of the building in which the Embassy was located we could look down and see this. Then we began to notice fires starting in various areas of the city in the view from our rooftop offices.

We began receiving phone calls from Embassy people, reporting that there was trouble here and there around the city. Then the city seemed to explode with violence in all sorts of areas over the next two hours, as word spread that there was rioting going on. Other people became involved in it. It seemed fairly clear that the violence was started by Malays in most instances. As I stated before, it was really an "amok" situation, as they just lashed out blindly at any non-Malays around them. We were concerned that anybody who was not a Malay by definition a potential target, whether they were white, yellow, or black. So we were concerned for the safety of the American community.

From the Federal Hotel, before I left there, I had called the secretary and the communicator and asked them to go to the Embassy, which they immediately did, arriving a couple of minutes before we did. One CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] officer and another communicator were able to get to the Embassy, making a total of seven in the Embassy. Civil authority had broken down almost totally; the riots spread very quickly in a couple of hours throughout the city. The DCM couldn't get in from his house. Curiously

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enough, Ambassador Bell was in an interesting position. He was playing poker with Tunku Abdul Rahman, the Prime Minister, at the Tunku's residence, which was on a hillside overlooking the valley in which the bulk of the city was located. The Ambassador called the Embassy, found that I was there, and said that he couldn't get out of the Tunku's residence. So we were operational but on a very limited, staffing basis.

Q: Did the phone system work during throughout this time?

HELBLE: The phone system worked throughout this time. We had a radio on which we could tune in on police bands, so we were able to gain a fair amount of information about where the police were going next and the situation as reported by various police field units back to Police Headquarters and so on. We started calling a number of people in the Embassy who lived in various sections of the city to see what was going on in those areas. In some areas things were quiet. In other areas there were fires and a lot of commotion. Some people reported that they had been caught outside of their houses, driving home or something like that, and went through a very scary situation.

There was an AP [Associated Press] stringer in Kuala Lumpur whom we knew. Of course, in the best of journalistic traditions, he was out in the streets. Within hours he knew enough, for example, to check several of the local hospitals and find out something about casualties. The casualty figures came in slowly. The government casualty figures were never honest. We knew that from the diverse reports we were receiving. This is not uncommon in situations where governments don't want to admit the degree of disorder that has occurred and their inability to handle the situation. It was clear that the government had lost control. The police were totally outnumbered and didn't have the resources to deal with the situation.

These incidents started early in the evening of May 13. Within six hours or so one or more elements of the Malay regiments were deployed into the streets to restore order. They were not fully successful for at least 24 hours. On the morning of May 15, some

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36 hours after the incidents began, the Ambassador and the DCM were finally able to reach the Embassy. The Malay regiments had not been trained in restoring order in the streets. There were several reports, none of which could really be confirmed but which were so numerous that there was obviously some truth to them, that the Malay forces were shooting indiscriminately at Chinese houses. If anybody poked their heads out, the Malay forces would fire at them. I believe that there were enough incidents like that to aggravate the situation.

Meanwhile, moving groups of Chinese and Malays continued to encounter each other and fight. The AP reporter would report that he found 13 persons dead at such and such a hospital and an undetermined number of wounded, and so forth. The numbers of casualties grew, hour by hour. Ultimately, to round off that particular element of the situation, in its final report the government reported about 200 killed. Other sources claimed that the figure of persons killed was in excess of 2,000. From our review of the evidence, I would say that a good, round number of persons killed would be in the order of 1,300-1,500. So there was chaos for a time, widespread torching and extensive loss of life.

Q: Was there any breakdown of persons killed by racial community?

HELBLE: The government was very careful to avoid publishing that. However, the weight of the evidence was that there were far more non-Malays than Malays killed. Of course, in that respect, there was a companion allegation that that was in part because the Malay police and soldiers were backing up the Malays in the street gangs, rather than trying to suppress disorderly conduct by either side. So there were charges, which were widely believed in the non-Malay community, of gross favoritism, if you will, on the part of the authorities and that, in fact, some of the Malay police and soldiers contributed to the ratio of persons killed, who were largely non-Malays.

To give you an example, and we all know how difficult it sometimes is to assess the validity of reports under these circumstances, late on the second day of rioting say, Phil

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Gill, Joe Moyle, and I were standing at my office window, looking down on the street and the small river Sungei Klang that winds through Kuala Lumpur. One of them said, "Look, there's a body floating down the river." So we looked, and, yes, indeed, there was a body floating down there. Gill, a Malay language officer, said, "It's a Malay body." Joe Moyle, a Chinese language officer, looked at the same body and said, "No, it's a Chinese body." I said, "How can you guys tell?" They both said, "By the way it's dressed." I said, "But that body is naked. There are no clothes on it at all." So there were three, presumably reputable eyewitnesses, all seeing three different things. To this day I don't know whether that body was that of a Malay or a Chinese. It certainly didn't make any difference, but this was just a side commentary on how difficult it is, under circumstances like this, to determine exactly what happened in a given situation, even if there are eyewitness reports available.

Well, those riots really changed the power equations in Malaysia. The curfew, proclaimed on the evening of May 13, lasted for five months. During the first week it was lifted for an hour or two, in staggered sections of the city, so that people could get out to market and buy food. Q: This was a 24-hour curfew?

HELBLE: It was a 24-hour curfew. For two days it was a total curfew, and nobody at all was allowed out on the streets. By the third day the authorities had to do something about the food situation, so they tried to open a market for two hours in this section and two hours over there, so that the police forces could concentrate on whatever market was open. There were several, major incidents the first day the curfew was slightly eased, and it went back to a full, 24-hour curfew. Again, the authorities couldn't starve the population totally, so they opened up this or that market for one hour at a time, with a much heavier presence of police.

Emotions were extremely inflamed on both sides. The government security forces were very hard pressed. They had never seen anything like this. I should say that outside of Kuala Lumpur there were some incidents—in Penang and Ipoh—and some unrest, when

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people started to hear what had gone on in Kuala Lumpur. The rest of the country did not become as inflamed and did not have the explosive events that had taken place in Kuala Lumpur. Gradually, although incidents continued to occur, the curfew was relaxed for several hours—five hours for the whole city—as confidence began to be restored. And as people had time to reflect that maybe this kind of street violence wasn't quite the thing to engage in, and they were getting tired of it, over the next five months an atmosphere of quiet was reestablished.

Of course, some people were arrested who were thought to have played some sort of leading role. However, there were very few in that respect, and there were no mass roundups.

I said that the situation in Kuala Lumpur changed on an apparently permanent basis, because it became evident, as the political process developed, that it was difficult to know how to cope with all of this. Of course, there was never any official acknowledgment that the Malays had initiated the disturbances, so to speak, but it was clear that this was true. At the same time, there was plenty of evidence that the Chinese had taunted the Malays into the violence by their “victory” parade of May 12.

From a political point of view the long and short of the government's response was, “We've got to do more for the Malay community.” For its political survival, the government needed to do that. Government leaders were convinced that the Malay community would not continue to accept a situation in which the Chinese community heavily dominated the economic life of the country and held most of its wealth. There had to be some greater share of the economic wealth of the country directed toward the Malays. So a number of economic programs and initiatives were undertaken, as well as the establishment of bumiputra (indigenous) Malay banks, manufacturing plants, and promises of greater educational opportunity. There was a movement toward the use of only Malay as the language of instruction in the school system. All of this was deemed essential if there were to be any degree of racial or communal harmony restored.

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Of course, the Chinese community basically fought all of this, inch by inch. However, in the final analysis, they had little alternative to accepting it, at least in part. In the last analysis it really didn't hurt the Chinese that much, because they had always been successful in paying off Malay politicians to get breaks and favors where they needed them. Of course, Chinese financial influence led to a lot of corruption at the higher levels of the Malay community, including the leadership and the bureaucratic elements within it. That system had worked. Now, however, there was a question whether the Chinese could continue to do this on the same scale and whether Malay politicians and leaders could continue to be influenced by this process of corruption. Obviously, they would be risking their political necks if they didn't deliver some goods to the Malay community.

As time went by after the May 13 riots and the various sequels thereto, there were still eruptions going on five or six weeks after the outset of these disturbances. Some nasty incidents would erupt. The key point seemed to be that what the country needed to survive with some element of communal harmony or, at least, an absence of violent communal conflict, was that the economic wealth of that country had to expand. In other words, you wouldn't cut too much into the Chinese community, and there still had to be opportunities for them. They were the engine of the economy. You couldn't pour water into their gasoline tanks without creating severe consequences for everybody. Yet it would be necessary to expand greatly the opportunities and percentages of wealth held by the Malay community.

The good news is that, looking back at the situation from the perspective of some 25 years, this has essentially happened. The country, which had considerable natural resources, has now made major additions to its natural gas and oil wealth, in addition to what existed in terms of timber, tin, and rubber. It has now expanded its industrial framework to include more than light industrial production. Medium sized and more sophisticated manufacturing activity is now widespread. Over the past 20 years Malaysia has had a more rapid rate of economic growth than the vast majority of other, developing nations in the world, even in East Asia.

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All things considered, Malaysia has had a stable, political leadership which has been relatively moderate but more Malay oriented, as they made the profound decision that they had to after the 1969 disturbances. Malaysia has been blessed with a fairly high quality bureaucracy and a relatively good judicial system, compared to much of Southeast Asia. In short, they have made a success of it.

However, as you said earlier, Tom, racial tensions have not disappeared, but they have been moderated and wrapped in the blanket of economic success. This has allowed all of the various racial communities to derive some benefit and to have some hope for the future. But the hostilities are too deep, as we know from our own experience, to dismiss the possibility of a resumption of the threat of open hostility and a breakdown of government, should economic conditions deteriorate.

Q: Have national elections regularly been held since the time of the riots of 1969?

HELBLER: They have always been held on schedule. This is a Parliamentary system, so the timing of the elections varies within the context of the constitution. The Malays continue to dominate the political process. After the May 13 riots Tunku Abdul Rahman regarded one of the ultra Malay nationalists as a threat to communal unity and harmony. This was Dr. Mahathir Mohamed. He was ostracized and forced to leave the country for about six months. When he returned to Malaysia, he was regarded as a real pariah. I invited him to my house for a small dinner not too long after he came back to Malaysia. It was the first time that a Western diplomat had invited him to a social affair since the May 13 riots. He was just considered a pariah by the government, and you didn't touch this fellow. He subsequently became Prime Minister and has continued as Prime Minister for about the past 10 years or so. He represented the Malays' demands for more opportunity for the Malays, to balance out the advantages which the Chinese had by dint of their own effort. They had the advantages which, the Malays felt they had been deprived of, despite

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the fact that they had the political power and, if you will, the power of the gun to obtain a change in that equation.

It's been 12 years or so since I was last there in Malaysia. I don't follow the situation as closely as I did. I think that, basically, Malaysia is a very functional country. However, it will never be secure from communal problems.

Q: I last visited there in 1991 during a cruise through Southeast Asia. I was supposed to deliver lectures on the different countries we were visiting. The impression I had was that, on the whole, KL [Kuala Lumpur] hadn't changed that much. There were some new buildings, but the atmosphere was about the same. I think that you're absolutely right. Communal tension is a continuing problem, and it won't be resolved very soon. The Malays will barely remain in political control of the country, and it remains to be seen whether the Chinese will accept this arrangement, in exchange for the dominant economic position which they enjoy. Is there anything else you want to say about Malaysia?

HELBLER: Yes, there are several things. There are some specific highlights that I'd like to mention.

What I've just covered basically is what consumed my attention for the first year that I was in Kuala Lumpur [1969-1970]. Of course, it was the backdrop against which almost everything else that happened was measured, during my four-year tour there. There were a couple of incidents of at least entertainment value to myself.

In 1970—I don't recall the month—the Vice President of the United States, Spiro Agnew, visited Kuala Lumpur. We, as an Embassy, experienced what most Foreign Service Officers have experienced in one place or another. We went through the horrors attendant...

Q: This was Spiro Agnew.

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HELBLER: Yes. I was effectively the Control Officer for the visit. There was an awful advance man who came and went and also visited Bali and Canberra. Vice President Agnew was going on to Australia, so this advance man bounced back and forth between Kuala Lumpur, Bali, and Canberra. Bali was a stop for the Vice President and his party, and the advance man seemed to need to visit Bali frequently. I won't bore you with all of the details of the pain created by the advance man but I'll give you one or two examples.

It had been decided that Vice President Agnew would play golf with Tunku Abdul Rahman, the Prime Minister. The Tunku only played the old course at the Royal Selangor Golf Club, which is the premier club in Kuala Lumpur. He did not play the New Course. The Old Course was a men's only course. Since about 1965, on one day a year women had been allowed to play the Old Course, but just for that one day. The golf event on the Vice President's program was so short, from the point of view of time, that it was agreed that they would play just nine holes. If the Tunku played only nine holes, it was his custom to play only the second nine. Agnew's advance man said that he didn't like the back nine course. He said that there were too many trees and that it was too much of a security threat to the Vice President. They would have to play somewhere else. Well, the long and short of it was that they ended up playing the back nine, but it was not an easy process to arrange. Then the Vice President's advance party found out that the Tunku always walked, and, in fact, there were only two golf carts in Malaysia. The Tunku himself had a golf cart but he never used it. The King of Malaysia had a cart. Well, Agnew's people said, "No, no, Agnew's got to ride. You can't make him walk." We made every effort to explain why the Malaysians wouldn't use carts and that the Tunku always walked—never used a cart. Yes, somebody gave him a cart many years before, but he never used it. So, it was going to be a walking event and was going to be on the back nine of the Old Course.

The advance people had their own set of requirements. At one point they said, "It's perfectly clear that what they want us to do is to bring in a couple of carts and then donate them to the Tunku at the end of the visit," which, of course, was a lot of baloney. The

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Malaysians didn't use carts. Nobody wanted carts. In fact, I saw the King playing golf a number of times. I won't say that he never used the cart, but I never saw him using the cart. I saw him walking the course. In any event, there was that sort of nastiness going on.

Vice President Agnew was scheduled to lay a wreath at the National Cenotaph in memory of those killed during the war against the Communists, 1948-1960. The advance person inspecting the cemetery found that the base of the Cenotaph was surrounded by gravel. He said, "This will never do, because the Vice President could step forward the two steps to lay down the wreath. He could slip, twist his ankle, and he'd be wiped out for the rest of his trip." He said, "They'll have to pave over the base of the Cenotaph." [Laughter] I said, "You can't do that. This is their National Monument." He said, "Well, it's got to be done. We can't take the chance."

Well, I finally sent him a telegram when he was in Bali or Canberra, reporting on the progress in arranging for the various events. I reported, "The base of the Cenotaph will be 'stabilized.'" He took that to mean that we were doing what he had told us to do. It was a euphemism for me. I got the caretakers to rake the area a little bit. [Laughter] When the advance man saw that it was still gravel on the morning before the arrival of Vice President Agnew, he went ballistic. I said, "It's too late now. It's all in the program."

Q: It was all printed. [Laughter]

HELBLE: Well, the Agnew visit to Kuala Lumpur was another one of these "smashing diplomatic successes." When Agnew got off the plane, another issue had been how many hands he would shake. The Malaysians said, "Well, the Chief of Protocol will meet him on the plane and shake hands with him. The Foreign Minister and the Prime Minister will meet him at the foot of the steps coming down from the plane, so there are those three people to shake hands with him. Then the Cabinet will be lined up to shake his hand." As I recall, there were about 20 members of the Cabinet. Then there were the Chiefs of Mission of the Diplomatic Corps. The advance man said, "No, no. The Vice President will shake the

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hands of the Chief of Protocol, the Prime Minister, and the Foreign Minister, and that's that."

Well, there was a big battle over this. The Malaysians were very offended. They said, "No, every Chief of State who comes here and all of the VIP's who come here must shake the hands of the members of the Cabinet." The long and short of it was that Agnew got off the plane. We didn't know how this issue was going to work out. Of course, our Ambassador was present at the foot of the steps. Vice President Agnew was introduced around and shook hands. The Prime Minister took him down the Cabinet line and introduced this minister and that. Agnew went down the line and shook hands. At this point the Chief of the Advance Party, J. Goodearl, got extremely upset, grabbed the Foreign Minister, and said, "This has got to stop! He's not supposed to be shaking these hands. This has got to be stopped!" He was making a very audible scene. Tan Sri Ghazali was the Foreign Minister, and he was a very independent and outspoken person. He was very quick and very bright. He wheeled on Goodearl and the advance man, and said, "You want him to get back on the plane? We'll put him back on the plane. Right now. He can go. We've had enough of a visit." Poor Jack Lydman, our Ambassador, was witnessing this. He physically stepped between the advance man and Ghazali and said, "Of course, the Vice President doesn't mind shaking all these hands. There's no problem." Meanwhile, Ambassador Lydman was pushing Goodearl away from Ghazali. We almost had a diplomatic breakdown. If anybody could do it, Ghazali would have done it. He might just have said, "Mr. Vice President, you're not welcome here any more! Get back on that plane!"

Q: Was there ever any indication that Agnew really objected to shaking hands?

HELBLE: No.

Q: This was a staff-manufactured incident entirely. Sad to say, it happens all the time.

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HELBLE: It happens all the time. Imagine this incident. In preparing for the dinner which the Prime Minister was going to host at his residence for Vice President Agnew, the Secret Service told us that they would have to inspect the Prime Minister's residence and do a security check prior to the dinner. They would do an early check and then, an hour before the dinner, they would do it again. Well, they insisted that the security check would involve the entire residence, including the bedrooms of the Prime Minister and his wife. You can imagine the response from the Malaysian security officials, who were not incompetent. They were competent and efficient people, as police and security officials go in the developing world. Malaysia is not really the Third World. It is much better than that. Of course, there was a big to do about this "inspection."

Finally, the matter came to Prime Minister Abdul Rahman's attention. The Prime Minister said, "You can go anywhere you want in this house, but NOT in my bedroom." [Laughter] In any event, these were these types of demands. The whole point of the story, of course, is that nothing useful ever eventuated from the visit. It was just like the Honolulu Conference episode involving the Vietnamese and President Johnson, though not on as grand a scale. It just involved the formalities of a high level visit, which was for show — nothing else.

I have to finish off this episode with what, to me, was one of my great coups in the Foreign Service. I may have told you this story, Tom, but at the golf event Phil Gill, one of my Political Officers whom I mentioned before, was the event officer because he was a golfer. Actually, he got to use the Prime Minister's golf cart. Phil was there, in the golf cart, in the event that some urgent requirement for Vice President Agnew would come up. Agnew was walking the course but might have to get back to the club house in a hurry—for a "national security crisis" or something, said his staff. The Vice President would have a cart available there, under Phil's control. However, Phil's responsibility was to stay well behind the party as they walked down the fairway—and not get near the action.

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After the golf event J. Roy Goodearl, Agnew's chief staffer, came to me and complained that Gill had followed the party too closely. Gill had allegedly refused to obey a Secret Service agent's orders for him to fall farther back. Phil said, "I have to stay within shouting distance." Anyway, Goodearl made this oral complaint to me. He was very upset.

That evening, after the dinner at the Prime Minister's residence, the party came back to the Merlin Hotel, where we had them quartered and where we had a Control Office. Some of them went to the dance show at the hotel which featured two Australian strip teasers. By about 11:45 PM several cars in the Motor Pool under my control had been dispatched on various missions or were checked out by various members of the vice presidential party, with our Malay drivers. I was down to three vehicles. I received a call from the lobby from Yusof, my Malay Motor Pool Coordinator, who said, "Mr. Goodearl would like to take a car."

I'm trying to think of the name of the Secret Service guy involved in this episode. You may know him. He's the guy who jumped onto the back of President Kennedy's car at the time of the assassination in Dallas in 1963. He was seen in a great picture, being pulled into the car by Jackie Kennedy. Yes, his name was Hill—Clint Hill. He was the chief of the Secret Service detail assigned to Vice President Agnew. Anyway, his name will come up in a minute.

So Yusof said, "Mr. Goodearl would like a car to go to the Federal Hotel." I said, "Yusof, how many cars do you have?" He said, "I have three." I said, "OK, you can release one." I wanted to keep one car at all times for the ultimate emergency, whatever that would be. About five minutes later Yusof called again from the lobby and said, "Mr. Clint Hill would like a car to go to the Federal Hotel." I said, "You have two cars left. Is that correct, Yusof?" He said, "Yes." I said, "OK, Mr. Hill can have one." But I said, "Don't let the last car go under any circumstances."

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About 45 minutes later I had a call from Yusof, who said, "Mr. Helble, could you please come down to the lobby immediately?" Both of the drivers had returned from their missions, supposedly to take Goodearl and Hill to the Federal Hotel. Actually, both Goodearl and Hill had separately taken one of the Australian strippers in their respective government cars. In both cases the Malay drivers were absolutely livid and were threatening to walk off the job and get all of the other Malay drivers to walk off the job. Yusof was about ready to walk off the job himself. Yusof was a very dedicated employee of the Embassy. Both Malay drivers reported to Yusof, and then to me directly, that Goodearl and Hill had used the back seat of the government vehicles operated by Malay drivers for what one might call a rather intimate, social experience. The Malay drivers, good Muslims that they were, as well as good Embassy employees, were deeply, deeply offended by this behavior. As I said, they wanted to leave the job.

I told them, in no uncertain terms, that I would see to it that this would not happen again. I asked them, as a favor to me and in view of their responsibility to the Embassy, to stay on the job. Certainly, if anything like this happened again, I wanted to hear about it immediately.

The next morning, at about 6:00 AM, I received a call from Mr. Goodearl, who wanted to see me in his hotel room. When I got there, Mr. Hill was also present. They now indicated that they were going to file an official complaint about Phil Gill's alleged violations of the understanding about the arrangements out on the golf course involving the golf cart in which Phil was following the Vice President's party. They intended to make very clear that this complaint should have an adverse affect on Gill's career.

I said, "Well, you'll probably have to file that cable at the next post, because it's not getting out of here through our communications facilities. But you can file it. That's within your rights." I said, "By the way, the behavior of you two gentlemen in the back seats of your respective cars last night with your Australian female companions has been fully reported to me by the Embassy drivers, who were very upset about your behavior." I said, "You

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know, it's amazing how stories of this kind get around. We don't have a lot of American journalists coming through here, but we fairly regularly have the 'New York Times' and the 'Washington Post' representatives visit here. Then we have the American wire services represented here, and other journalists coming through here. The kind of behavior of you two gentlemen, particularly last night, is the sort of thing that just makes a lovely story if it somehow happens to slip out and is presented at the appropriate time and to the appropriate people. It's the sort of thing that really would look 'nasty.'"

They sat there for, I would say, 30 seconds. It seemed like 10 minutes, but it was probably 30 seconds. They just looked and glared at me without saying anything. I said, "Do we have an understanding now about Mr. Gill versus the other side of this thing?" Well, they were defeated. They could see that. They said, "All right, all right. Now get the hell out of here." [Laughter] So no complaint was filed against Gill, and I had no particular reason to see that the story was leaked to the American press. However, I fully intended to get it into somebody's hands if anything was done about Gill. As I say, that was probably my greatest coup.

Q: Well, I think that one thing about prominent personalities is that some of them are very impressive and very good people. But some of them are really terrible. Our country is no different from any other country in this respect. It's just appalling that this sort of thing happens, that you have to put up with this sort of business and that these people are in a position to cause serious harm and serious damage to someone else.

HELBLE: One good thing came out of the Agnew visit. It took place about nine months after Ambassador Jack Lydman and his wife, Jody, arrived in Kuala Lumpur. In the Lydman's first week in Kuala Lumpur and after consultation with the Ambassador, I had angered Jody by inviting the Ambassador to a stag bridge game. We had the Japanese Ambassador playing, as well as the Thai DCM [Deputy Chief of Mission], the Canadian DCM, and so forth. I thought that it would be a nice, informal, casual setting for our Ambassador to get to know some of these people. He had exhibited an interest in playing

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bridge. Mrs. Lydman was absolutely furious and would not shake my hand at a reception given for them by our Military Attach#s at a hotel. On the spot she stopped the reception line, glared at me, and wanted to know why I had invited the Ambassador to a stag bridge game. She asked if I understood that she and her husband did everything together. She said, "By the way, it's important for you to understand that my husband brings home the Evaluation Reports on all of his officers before he finalizes them." He would show them to her and ask for her comments. This was a bare threat which, of course, totally turned me off.

So, in effect, for nine months, although I went to the Ambassador's residence repeatedly for official functions, Mrs. Lydman never said more than a perfunctory hello and never shook my hand. I never offered it again after the first time, when she refused to shake it. We had a very hostile relationship, which worried my wife, Joan, considerably but didn't worry me at all because the Ambassador's attitude toward me didn't change a bit. I thought that he was too decent a man to let this be a factor.

Q: This was a gross violation of privacy. In today's Foreign Service this would have been a basis for a grievance case.

HELBLE: Right, but this was before 1972...

Q: When the edict was issued by the Department clearly restricting Ambassadors' wives from interfering in Embassy business.

HELBLE: Right. But in any event the Ambassador had had so many "crises" come up during the preparations for the visit of Vice President Agnew, which I was trying to manage.

Q: Well, he had to know about them.

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HELBLER: He did to know about them. The bottom line of this episode of conflict with Mrs. Lydman and its relationship to the visit of Vice President Agnew was that Mrs. Lydman had become very much aware of the nasty problems that I had to wrestle with and, she concluded, I had rendered her husband good service in that connection. After the Agnew visit, she immediately expressed these sentiments. She did not express her forgiveness over the stag bridge episode in so many words. However, it was clear that our previous confrontation was over, and there were no further problems from that point on.

Q: Did you shake hands with her after that?

HELBLER: I certainly did. We went back to hand shaking.

In 1971 there was a massive flood in downtown Kuala Lumpur, a major disaster. I was very much involved in running the disaster relief program and organizing the C-130 aircraft flights which the U. S. Air Force brought in, laden with boats, blankets, food, medicines, etc. It was a good experience in crisis management. I had never handled anything like that previously. Fortunately, this was a relatively short term problem. After four or five days the problems eased off. This was one thing that certainly gave me another set of experiences during my tour in Kuala Lumpur.

I did a lot of travel out of Kuala Lumpur—to Sarawak, Brunei, and other parts of North Borneo. In the Malay Peninsula itself I traveled to Penang, Ipoh, and to the East Coast, including Kota Bharu, as well as to Johore, and Melaka. This came naturally to me after the experiences I had in Hue, where travel outside the city was just another aspect of the job. I looked forward to the opportunity to get out and spend three, four, or five days seeing different parts of the country, meeting different political leaders and local officials, and so forth. I enjoyed that, with one exception. I ended up in a jungle north of Kota Bharu State of Kelantan with a Malaysian politician who was a doctor. He had an urgent call to make out in the jungle late one night. He took his Volkswagen down what was literally a jungle path. I waited for him outside the little hut while he treated his patient. I was bombarded by

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mosquitoes. I came home and in a few days had malaria, which passed fairly quickly and never recurred. However, one experience with malaria in a lifetime was quite enough. It was not a lot of fun.

Of course, political attitudes outside of the capital city, just as was the case in South Vietnam were quite different from the attitudes that you heard expressed in the capital city. People tended to be, of course, more parochial in their concerns. However, in some cases their views were more vividly expressed. If you went to the upper East Coast in the State of Kelantan, for example, where Kota Bharu was, strong Malay nationalist sentiments were very acute there. There was a very small and insignificant non-Malay community in that area. If you wanted to get close to the heartbeat of the Malay soul, it was very useful to talk to a number of Malays in that particular, geographical area. Indeed, they had very considerable influence on long-term Malay political development and on the Malay orientation of government policy over a period of years.

It was worthwhile getting out and meeting people like that. I would go up to the American Consulate in Songkhla Thailand, where my good friend, John Kelly, was Consul for two of the years that I was in Kuala Lumpur. Kelly, of course, later went on to be Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs, Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs, and Ambassador to Finland and Lebanon. We would discuss a number of border issues, including the small, Communist-led insurgencies that existed on both sides of the Thai-Malaysian border. These insurgencies were differently based and involved different political and ethnic groupings. Some Malay irredentist activity proliferated at various times along the border. Of course, there was considerable smuggling and gangsterism in southern Thailand, in particular, which had some impact on the border area.

At least once every six months I would go to Songkhla, and once every six months Consul Kelly would come to Kuala Lumpur. I would take my family to Songkhla, and he would bring his family down to Kuala Lumpur. On one occasion our mutual good friend, Jim Montgomery, came down from his post as Consul in Chiang Mai [Thailand]. This had

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nothing whatsoever to do with official business. He and his family came down and joined us. The Kelly's, the Helble's, and, subsequently, the Montgomery's were able to get together and develop close friendships. So it was entertaining for all of us, as well as politically useful from our respective points of view.

Q: Is there anything else that you want to go into in terms of your four years in KL ?

HELBLE: I did want to say that during the first five months of our time in Kuala Lumpur we had lived on the western side of the city. Then we moved to the lowlands near the golf course, where there were 45 holes of golf to play, 18 grass tennis courts, a big swimming pool, and so on. This afforded the whole family good recreational opportunities. My opportunity for recreation was probably more extensive in Kuala Lumpur than it was at any other post in the Foreign Service, with both golf and tennis available, which I enjoyed very much.

One bad part of this, however, was that we had moved with a pair of what were known as Black and White Chinese servants. That is, they habitually wore old style white jackets and black trousers. They were really professional servants—women who, in effect, had almost taken an oath to serve. You might almost consider them as nuns. They were very dedicated people. One of them was the cook. She was an absolutely great, Western-style cook, and a great Chinese-style cook as well. The issue every night was, “What are we going to eat now?” We got into a routine of one night Western-style cooking and the next night, Chinese-style. We loved both of them so much. In any event, they moved with us.

The week after we moved into the new house the cook got sick. It seemed to be a bronchial complaint, with a little fever and so on. Ultimately, she decided that when she cleaned her room after we arrived in the new house, she had touched a little, glass bowl that had some ashes in it. She concluded that those ashes were a talisman burned by a Malay servant of the previous residents of the house. The Malay servant had lived in the same room that our cook now lived in. The Malay servant had not wanted to leave

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the house. When obliged to leave because the family she was serving was leaving, she had sought the assistance of a Malay bomoh —someone who might crudely have been described as a witch doctor.

So the Malay servant of the previous residents of the house sought the assistance of the bomoh to ensure that she could, in fact, stay at the house. He allegedly gave her this talisman to burn, telling her that this would help her to stay in the house. Of course, this didn't have the desired effect, from her point of view. However, our Chinese cook felt that she had been contaminated by this, and it was causing her to be ill.

This situation went on for several weeks. I thought that it was all a joke. However, one day I came home, and Joan said, "They've left and they'll never come back, because this is a 'bad' place now." I really bemoaned the loss of two extremely capable members of the household staff—and particularly that marvelous cook. However, it seemed that there was nothing to be done about it. We offered them more money, but they said that that had nothing to do with it. So we hired a replacement cook, and that cook also became sick within a week or so. We then had the water checked, we had various inspections made, but the second cook left us. A third cook was hired, lasted for three days or so, and left. Then we ran into what was really a dry hole. We couldn't find anybody who would work for us.

Q: The word had gone out.

HELBLE: The word had gone out on the bamboo telegraph that this was a bad house. We had many potential servants come in for an interview. Joan would sit down with them and start to talk to them. They hadn't discussed wages or anything of that sort. Joan would notice that the person being interviewed would become flushed and start to perspire on her forehead. On several occasions she just got up, said, "I can't work here!"—and then dashed off. By this time it was clear that we had a problem.

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Meanwhile, I had fairly heavy representational responsibilities, with dinners, parties, and so on. We had to suspend all of that activity. Therefore, the issue became a matter of concern for the Country Team, and it was discussed on more than one occasion at Country Team meetings. The Ambassador would say, "We've got to do something—we'll have to move you to another house." I, of course, regarded this with derision. What nonsense! I felt that this was just silly. I thought that we would get through this. I said, "Don't worry, I'll do my job. I'll do the entertaining I have to do in some way," and so forth. Well, they said, you're having trouble, and so on. I said, "It's an Embassy-owned house. Somebody's got to live there. I'm going to live there. That's what it was intended for," when it was acquired years before. It had been a rubber plantation manager's house.

In any event, we couldn't hire anybody. Joan was doing the cooking. Then Joan came down with some mysterious ailment. She got weaker and weaker. The doctors couldn't figure it out. We had a U. S. military research team doing research on tropical diseases in Kuala Lumpur. The head doctor there looked at Joan. Our own British doctor looked at her, as did an Indian doctor and so on. Finally, she got so weak that she couldn't get out of bed for more than an hour and ultimately couldn't get out of bed at all. She had no stamina. We took her to the British doctor again. He did a blood test and then told her, "You have a spirochete." Well, I didn't know what a spirochete was, but it apparently gets into the blood system and the vital organs and, in short order, you're dead! In fact, this British doctor said to her, "It is my judgment that you have three to five days to live!" Joan didn't call me at the office and tell me this. I came home and said, "Well, what did the doctor say?" She sort of straight-facedly said to me, "He says that I have three to five days to live." Obviously, I was horrified. She seemed to be taking it pretty well but she was just probably numb.

So I said, "We're going to have to get you out of here," and immediately made arrangements for the U. S. Army Fifth Field Hospital outside of Bangkok to take her. It was the judgment of the doctors that she was too weak to fly all the way to Manila, because

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there were no direct flights. So we put her on a stretcher, loaded her on a commercial flight, and flew her up to Bangkok. She was greeted there by the Embassy in Bangkok. They checked her into the U.S. Army Fifth Field Hospital. They kept her for a week and did various tests. They thought that it was a liver-type disease but could never confirm anything. After a week in the hospital under strict, dietary control she seemed to regain some strength but not very much. They released her because they said that there was nothing more that they could do.

They sent her back to Kuala Lumpur. We put her back in bed and kept her diet under control. We did not yet have any domestic staff. We hadn't been able to hire anybody for months, at this point.

In any event it took several more months, but gradually she regained her strength. There were never any after effects once she was fully operational again. The whole episode lasted for five or six months. It was all very scary. We never did know what the cause of this was. It certainly wasn't a spirochete, but something else. We just didn't know.

Meanwhile, we had to hire some staff. Eventually, a couple came along. The husband was the cook, and he said, "Oh, I know all about that story. That's targeted against female cooks only. It won't affect me." Well, he was a lousy cook. His wife was a very harsh taskmaster, keeping the house clean but sharply correcting our kids and so on. But this husband and wife team were there, and so we lived with it. We kept them because we couldn't hire anybody else. They were there until we left Kuala Lumpur, except that, about five months before we left, the cook got off a bus at the Central Market, stepped on a banana peel, fell, and broke his hip.

However, the other thing that I haven't mentioned is that we had an exorcism done by C. C. Too. He was the Director of Psychological Warfare Planning in the Ministry of Home Affairs. He had been trained by the British in the war against the Communist guerrillas. He was a very clever fellow and was considered by most people to have extraordinary

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powers. When he heard the story of our problems at a dinner at the Ambassador's, he said, "I have to come over and do a 'job' on your house."

Well, I thought that it was a joke, but my wife said, "We're going to try it." So, on the next day, he visited our house and explained to Joan what he was going to do. Joan called me at the Embassy and said, "He's going to come over at 7:00 PM tonight. He said, 'Invite any friends that you want, and they can witness this.'" So we lined up a dozen friends, all on the spur of the moment, all of whom knew about the problem.

They came over. C. C. Too explained to the group that he was convinced that this involved an evil force—not a ghost, but an "evil force." The question was whether C. C. Too's powers were greater than the powers of the bomoh, the Malay witch doctor who had brought the evil force into the house. So he went into what I can only describe as a period of deep concentration—not quite a trance. He told us that we could keep talking, so we sat there on our verandah. After about 45 minutes he said, "I have made contact with the 'evil force,' and there is no question that it is a 'force.' It is not a ghost. Now I have to demonstrate to the 'force' that I have greater powers than he who controls the 'force.' I have to repel him." So he went on in this way.

A little after 9:00 PM he said that he had succeeded in repelling the 'force' from the house. It was no longer there. He could not be certain how long it would stay away. It could return. It might be in three days, three months, or maybe it would never return. He said that he couldn't tell that. However, if it returned, we should contact him, and he would come right back.

At this point we had two young women who had just started working for us as domestic servants two days before. They were going to leave us that day, when Joan convinced them that we have a very strong man coming to take care of this problem. They decided to wait. They watched the whole ceremony from a distance, a few feet away from the kitchen door. After it was over, he went over to them and explained to them what he had done and

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said that everything was all right. Then he went next door to the companion house, where another American officer lived, got their servants out of their quarters, explained to them what had happened, and said that this house was now free of the evil force. Here was the psychological warfare expert, getting the word out on the bamboo telegraph as to what had happened.

In any event after about two weeks the two girls decided to leave. A little while after that we hired this elderly couple I referred to earlier—the poor gentleman who slipped on a banana peel in the Central Market. We had them as domestic employees for the next two years. It was quite an episode and quite the talk of the town. Everybody said, “Well, C. C. Too did it again.” It was an interesting experience. I had never seen an exorcism, but that's what it was.

All in all, Kuala Lumpur was a very enjoyable and comfortable posting. We had more facilities in Kuala Lumpur than we had at any other post, except, perhaps, Honolulu. We made a lot of life-long friends, including the current Japanese Ambassador in Washington. He has been a good friend of ours ever since we shared many experiences in Kuala Lumpur. The Deputy Japanese Foreign Minister is a good friend. Whenever he comes to Washington, I see him. We exchange Christmas cards. The Australian Ambassador to Rome was also a very good friend in Kuala Lumpur. You may have known him—Duncan Campbell. We still stay in touch with them. He was the First Secretary in the Australian High Commission when I arrived there. He had an American wife, Barbara. We had a lot of good friends, both Americans and non-Americans, including many Malaysians.

However, if you are lucky in the Foreign Service and make some effort to sustain relationships, you can make two, three, or four close friends in each posting. They carry on. At the end of a career you have a list of valued friends, if you stayed in touch. Some of them you'll never see again. But just staying in touch with them via the Christmas card routine is rewarding. If we hadn't stayed in touch, we wouldn't have encountered some of these people in subsequent years. They've come to stay in our house, or we've stayed

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with them during our travels. It's one of the real benefits in the Foreign Service, but you have to work a little bit at it or you just lose them. You leave a post and never see them again. You don't pursue the relationship.

Kuala Lumpur was a good assignment. Our children went to the International School, a small school with about 120 students, covering kindergarten through 12th grade. Our son Stuart did his 7th, 8th, 9th, and 10th grades there. He became very involved in sports and other activities. Our daughter Mona made a number of friends, several of whom she is still in contact with. We had delightful vacations at Fraser's Hill up in the cooler, mountains of central, West Malaysia or at the beaches in Penang. It was a wonderful posting, marred only by that disaster of May 13, 1969, the riots in Kuala Lumpur, which did, in fact, take a lot of the comfort out of our life.

Q: It reminded you that you were on the edge of disaster at any given time and you had no possibility of preventing it. It could happen.

HELBLE: That wraps up the Kuala Lumpur assignment, even though I had six months left.

Q: Well, part of that time you spent up at the Embassy in Saigon on temporary assignment. Tell us about that. How did that happen?

What did you do there, and so on?

HELBLE: We're referring here to January, 1973, when the Paris Accords on Vietnam were signed with the North Vietnamese, the South Vietnamese, and the "National Liberation Front"—the latter a "phony" organization that North Vietnam had created as a supposedly South Vietnamese political movement. The South Vietnamese Government in Saigon, and the U. S. Government also signed these agreements. The Soviet Union was a co-chairman, as I recall.

Q: Of the 1954 Geneva Conference on Vietnam.

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HELBLE: No, they were also involved in the 1973 Accord, weren't they?

Q: They had the responsibility—jointly with the British—of calling the Paris Conference in 1968. Neither they nor the British took part in the negotiations, which lasted until 1973. Lots of American Foreign Service Officers, including Phil Habib, spent a long time in Paris. Phil spent a couple years in Paris. Ambassador Marshall Green was there for a time, along with a lot of our old pals, who were involved in the negotiations at one time or another. Bob Miller, too.

HELBLE: Dave Lambertson, Dave Engel, too.

Q: And John Negroponte.

HELBLE: Well, the Paris Agreements were signed on January 27, 1973. While I was aware that the Department was going to assign back to Vietnam a number of Foreign Service Officers with prior Vietnam experience for temporary duty at the Embassy and that I was on the list, it was uncertain as to when the command would come. In fact, the list of officers to be called back varied as to numbers and composition for some weeks in advance of the actual implementation of the plan to send these Foreign Service Officers back to Vietnam. I remember having something less than 72 hours' notice that I was to report immediately to the Embassy in Saigon. Since I was close to Saigon, in Kuala Lumpur, I left on January 28, 1973, and arrived in Saigon the same day. I think that I was about the first one to come in from outside of Vietnam. I wasn't particularly overjoyed to do this, but my wife Joan understood—not too happily, but she understood. I had no excuse after three and one-half pleasant years in Kuala Lumpur. I had had a respite from Vietnam, and the country was “calling me.”

At that time there were 44 Foreign Service Officers brought back. I should say, 43 were brought back, plus one other Foreign Service Officer who had not had prior Vietnam service. When I arrived in Saigon, I found that my own job was to head the unit in the

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Political Section of the Embassy responsible for trying to get the International Control Commission...

Q: International Commission for Supervision and Control, ICSC, wasn't it?

HELBLE: ICCS—International Commission for Control and Supervision. My job was to help to get the ICCS deployed into the field. The ICCS was a body tasked with observing or monitoring but not enforcing the various provisions of the Paris Agreement. The ICCS consisted of four nations, including the Poles, who had been on the old ICC (International Control Commission). We talked briefly about the old ICC in an earlier part of this interview. The Canadians had also served on the old ICC and were on the ICCS. There were the Hungarians, who were new to the scene, and the Indonesians, who were also new to the scene. In all, these four countries were to bring in a total of 1140 officers and men. They were to be assigned to the headquarters of the ICCS in Saigon, to regional headquarters in the four major, military regions in South Vietnam, and then in a variety of small posts within those regions throughout the country. The ICCS was to observe whether the Paris Accord were implemented correctly or whether they were being violated and, if so, by whom. It was to investigate allegations regarding incidents and so on.

I had three other Foreign Service Officers on my staff, plus an American secretary on TDY [Temporary Duty]. They included Steve Johnson, son of U. Alexis Johnson, previously Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs. He was, in effect, my “Canadian speaker,” as he had served in Canada. There was Bill Shepard, who was a Hungarian language officer. He had previously served in Saigon as a staff aide to the Ambassador. Bill ultimately left the Foreign Service. He ran, unsuccessfully, as Republican candidate for Governor in Maryland. Steve Johnson had also previously served in Saigon. Vern Penner was the only one of the 44 FSO's involved in this temporary duty who had not previously served in Vietnam. However, he was a Polish language officer and was the Polish speaker on my staff. I was, of course, the Indonesian speaker, and chief of the unit.

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There were others, as you may recall with greater precision than I, who were assigned to other functions in connection with the implementation of the Paris Accord to beef up the Embassy and the Consulates General in these regional areas which paralleled where the ICCS had its regional headquarters. So a number of Foreign Service Officers were farmed out to the respective Consulates General. Others, such as you, stayed in Saigon and worked on...

Q: The Four Party Joint Military Commission.

HELBLE: Yes, the Four Party Joint Military Commission.

When I arrived in Saigon, I met briefly with Ambassador Bunker and then with Ambassador Whitehouse, who was the Deputy Ambassador. They really couldn't tell me what I was going to do, except in general terms of getting the ICCS deployed into the field. They gave me a copy of the Paris Agreement and suggested that I read that and go to work.

At that point there were no representatives from the four countries on the ICCS in Saigon. It took a while for them to start arriving in Vietnam. Certainly, they were not ready to deploy outside of Saigon until proper facilities were established for them to live and work. So the days dragged on and, in effect, there was no ICCS presence in operation as yet. Gradually, in came planeloads of military people from the various countries, as well as Political Advisers with them, and so on.

Meanwhile, my job was to provide support which would sustain these ICCS troops spread out over I forget how many small posts. I would say that there were several dozen.

Q: You're right. There were four regional headquarters paralleling the South Vietnamese corps structure. Then there was supposed to be an ICCS setup in each of the 44 provinces in South Vietnam. The four regional headquarters of the ICCS were set up. I

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think that two or three, as I recall, of the provincial headquarters of the ICCS were set up, but the rest were not.

HELBLE: More than a few of the provincial headquarters of the ICCS were eventually deployed, but I'm not sure that they were deployed to all 44 provinces. There were at least a couple of dozen ICCS teams deployed to the provinces within about three or four months, but I can't remember the exact number. Certainly, a number of small ICCS detachments were deployed outside of the regional headquarters. In any event the ICCS took the position that they weren't going anywhere unless: a) they had a place to go, including proper housing and office space; b) until they had proper ground transportation where they were going; c) that they had proper communications, both base camp to vehicles, base camp to headquarters in Saigon, and base camp to whatever regional headquarters was involved; d) that they had proper assurance of supplies. Here I'm not talking about ammunition and so on, since they weren't expending that, but food, medical supplies, medical assistance, and so on. They wanted access to a hospital in Saigon. The best hospital available was the Seventh Day Adventist Hospital; e) that they had air transportation, including both fixed wing and rotary wing aircraft, that is, helicopters; f) that they had ground vehicles of all sorts, including heavy duty trucks, jeeps (lots of them), and so on.

The ICCS requirements for logistical support were endless. New demands popped up every day from every quarter. Generally, these demands, or requests, were passed through the ICCS Secretariat, which was run by the Indonesian Delegation to the ICCS. While we, in our small unit in the Embassy, had liaison with each of the Delegations, and therefore had a need for language officers to deal with them, we also dealt a great deal with the Indonesian Secretary General of the ICCS as the head of the Secretariat.

I found that there were no ground rules in the Embassy to guide me. The simple job description was, "Get the ICCS operational in the field." A Major General, Jim Fairfield, who is still a good friend of mine and now retired and living in Tucson, AZ, was assigned

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by MACV, the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam. This was the overall U. S. military command in Vietnam during the period from 1962 to 1973. General Fairfield was my liaison with the military command.

However, there was a clock ticking, because under the Paris Agreement, U. S. military had to leave Vietnam within 60 days after the Agreement was signed on January 27, 1973. This meant that the U. S. military had to leave Vietnam by about March 28, 1973. Most of the wherewithal that I could lay my hands on to transfer to the ICCS and get it operational was materiel controlled by MACV. Most of this equipment would have been turned over to the Vietnamese Army if I didn't get to it first. Of course, the U. S. military was in a big hurry to get out of the country, in order to comply with the Paris Agreement. It was trying to disengage itself from its holdings and assets and organize itself for timely departure from Vietnam by D+60 or March 28, 1973. The U. S. military did meet that schedule, incidentally.

Q: They did better than that. They left shortly after the middle of March, 1973.

HELBLE: Yes, but that was 60 days. I saw General Jim Fairfield off at the airport on D+59, the day before the last commanding general of MACV left Vietnam. Jim had served as the MACV liaison with our ICCS Embassy unit, and had arranged many of the material and facilities transfers we requested from MACV to the ICCS.

Q: There were a couple of exceptions, and that caused some problems later on. There were 200 Marines serving as Embassy security guards. Then there were 50 U. S. military personnel assigned to the Military Attach# office, which is a very unusual arrangement. They were considered to be part of the Embassy and not part of MACV. So there were a couple of little details...

HELBLE: But there was nothing resembling a combat unit or anything like that.

Q: No.

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HELBLE: The second source of support items for the ICCS was the U. S. Agency for International Development, an organization that came under USAID, which was terminating projects in some areas and so forth. One could get furniture, refrigerators, stoves, and even housing, in some areas.

Q: Automobiles, too.

HELBLE: Yes, although most of the vehicles had belonged to the U. S. military. The U. S. military had a lot of vehicles. They were just going to give them to the Vietnamese Army, which had more vehicles than it could use, anyway.

Q: Wasn't Pacific Architects & Engineers involved in this?

HELBLE: That's right. PA&E, as it was known, signed an agreement as a contractor for the ICCS Secretariat. Of course, PA&E had had many U. S. military and civilian contracts in Vietnam for years. They were well-established and had the capacity to do a lot of things which one couldn't have done through the local economy. We worked with PA&E personnel on a number of these activities. We were trying to establish, upgrade, and rehabilitate facilities for the ICCS, as well as maintenance contracts for the aircraft, communications equipment, and so forth which was being transferred to the ICCS.

However, to me this was really a wild scene, because there were no rules. For a couple of weeks, if I dutifully got the U. S. military to agree to transfer something to the Embassy for the ICCS, I would take some sort of receipt up to Ernie Colantonio, the Administrative Counselor of the Embassy, and get him to sign it.

Q: Ernie would sign anything. [Laughter]

HELBLE: That's right. He would sign anything. However, after a week or 10 days of my bothering him with these receipts, and he was frequently inaccessible because he was so busy, he said, "John, there's no need for you to bring these receipts up to me. Just sign

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them yourself.” I realized, as time went on, that I was signing for millions and millions of dollars worth of equipment.

Q: That's OK, John, as long as it's millions of dollars. You see, if it's \$200, they may hope to get it from you. But millions of dollars—they're never going to get it from you and they know it.

HELBLE: The day that the Embassy fell in Saigon April 30, 1975 to the North Vietnamese, I said to myself, “The Inspector General of the State Department will never get me now” [Laughter] “on those receipts for materiel which I long since lost control and track of.”

It was a crazy scene. Gradually, very gradually, the ICCS had less and less excuse not to deploy to the countryside. We were constantly prodding and pushing them to get on with it. However, it was weeks before they started doing any effective observing of anything and really several months before the ICCS was fairly well deployed and we were reading a fair number of observer reports from ICCS detachments.

Q: John, there's one story that I think we should put down here. I don't know the name of the Canadian Army Captain involved. You mentioned that contracts were entered into to provide air support for movement of ICCS personnel to these various provincial detachments.

Let me back up a bit. Air America was the only organization in Vietnam that had pilots, aircraft, and maintenance facilities that could provide this air support for the ICCS. Air America had had a considerable CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] involvement. At first the Poles and the Hungarians said, “Oh, no, we can't have that.” The alternative was, “Then what are you going to have? There is no other way.” Finally, you may recall, they went through the business of painting out the Air America logo on the helicopters and other aircraft, replacing it with ICCS. That seemed to do the job, because they were dealing with ICCS Air instead of Air America.

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One of these ICCS Air flights took various ICCS personnel, including Canadians, up to Quang Tri province, if I remember correctly, just South of the 17th parallel. By that time the North Vietnamese Army was all around there and totally controlled it. They obviously intended to take the American pilots from this aircraft as prisoners. A big Canadian Army Captain, whose name I never knew, didn't say anything. He just knelt down, put his arms around these two pilots, and held them there. It was obvious that there was going to be a terrible fight to get them free for capture, so the North Vietnamese Army obviously felt, "Oh, to hell with it," and abandoned their effort to take them. Those two pilots owe their freedom to this Canadian.

HELBLE: I have heard that story, yes. By D+60, of course, the U. S. military was gone. I was fond of saying that the 44 Foreign Service Officers were an appropriate balance to replace the 540,000 American troops that had been taken out of Vietnam. I thought that this was a pretty good calculation.

After the last U. S. military left, we continued to get pressing demands from the ICCS for more support. I had warned them in the weeks leading up to D+60 that we needed to get everything arranged before our last access to U. S. military assets was gone. However, I remember a couple of incidents that occurred after D+60.

Vern Penner was, and is an extraordinary fellow. He is still on active duty in the State Department. He is a diamond in the rough if there ever was one. He is a Brooklyn boy who spoke Brooklynese, was something of a street fighter by nature, energetic, and had a totally can do attitude. In fact, in the evaluation report I wrote on him I considered very carefully how to frame it. I had to say that this officer was straight out of Catch 22. He knew how to get things done.

One day, after the U. S. military had left Vietnam, the ICCS insisted that they must have a fire engine for their headquarters. They said that they couldn't afford not to have a fire engine on the site. I said, "Well, I don't have any access to fire engines."

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Q: That was all over.

HELBLE: That's right. To this day I still don't know how it was done. The day after I got this request I called together my three officers and posed the problem to them. I said, "Is there any way that we could get hold of a fire engine?"

The next day Vern Penner came to me and said, "John, about the fire engine. Don't worry. One is coming down from Nha Trang to Saigon and will report to ICCS Headquarters." I really knew better than to ask about it.

Q: [Laughter] Or where it came from.

HELBLE: On the following day I received a phone call from the Secretary General of the ICCS, thanking me for the fire engine.

Q: Don't ask.

HELBLE: I said, "Think nothing of it." In any event there was an even stranger affair, probably a week or two after the fire engine, and again after the U. S. military had left. The Secretary General of the ICCS called me one morning at 8:00 AM and said, "John, last night, in downtown Can Tho, in the Mekong Delta, a Vietnamese Army unit and a Civil Guard unit got into a firefight, apparently over some girl. Two members of the Indonesian ICCS detachment there, including the head of the detachment, a Colonel, happened to be driving through the town square as shooting broke out. The Colonel was hit in the forehead with a round from one side or another. Actually, he was all right. It didn't penetrate his skull, but it caused quite a scalp wound. He had to be medevac'd last night. He got to Tan Son Nhut Saigon airport about 12:30 or 12:45 AM. Unfortunately, we didn't have an ambulance to pick him up. All we had was a jeep to take him to the Seventh Day Adventist Hospital. It was very uncomfortable for him to ride in the jeep and could

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have been dangerous for his health, if the wound had been critical. We've got to have an ambulance."

I replied, "Look, I don't know where we could get an ambulance at this point. If you'd asked me this a month ago, I could have gotten one through the U. S. military, but we'll look into the problem."

So I assembled my staff again and asked how we could get an ambulance. Vern Penner said, "I'll take care of it." At 8:30 AM we broke up the staff meeting. At 9:30 AM I got a call from the Indonesian ICCS Secretary General, who said, "John, thanks very much for the ambulance. It's here, parked in front of ICCS Headquarters. We really appreciate it." I said, "That's fine. I'm glad you're happy about it. We do what we can do." I hung up and called, "Penner, come here." He came in and said, "Yes, boss." I said, "All right, I've got to know. How in the hell did you get an ambulance within an hour?" He said, "Well, I called my friend at PA&E. Penner continued, "I said to him, 'Look, take two of your biggest, brawniest Americans and park them down on the corner of Cong Ly Boulevard coming in from the airport, just before the Presidential Palace, and Hong Thap Tu Avenue,'" a street which crosses Cong Ly. There was a stoplight there. As you know, there was a Red Cross Hospital on Hong Thap Tu, and there was always a lot of ambulance traffic going down busy Cong Ly Boulevard and turning right at Hong Thap Tu to go to the Red Cross Hospital. Penner continued, "I told my friend at PA&E, 'The first ARVN ambulance that comes by and stops at the stoplight, haul the ARVN driver out of the ambulance and take it over to ICCS Headquarters.'"

Q: This was not a moonlight requisition but a daytime...

HELBLE: Right in the middle of heavy morning traffic. Penner said, "Obviously, that worked. The PA&E people said, 'OK, we'll do that.'" They went out and did it, and in less than an hour, there it was at ICCS Headquarters. I said to Vern, "I suppose you don't know whether there was a litter patient in the back of the ambulance." He said, "I don't

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know, but I'll call the PA&E guy." [Laughter] Anyway, as it turned out, there was no litter patient in the back of the ambulance, but there was no doubt one ARVN private, the driver of the ambulance, decided that he had better go over the hill, rather than explain to his superiors how he lost his ambulance. Whatever, the ICCS had an ambulance. That was Vern Penner at his best.

Q: If there's nothing else you want to say about this period of temporary duty in Vietnam, I might mention that we had the pleasure of sharing each other's company in an apartment in Saigon during this time. It was helpful to me to compare notes with you and keep in touch this way, building on a lifetime friendship.

HELBLE: I think that it was very helpful to both of us to have the comfort of each other's company, because neither one of us was very happy about being away from our families. You'd been yanked out of Canberra, Australia, and I'd been yanked out of Kuala Lumpur, leaving our spouses behind. We've both done that previously during assignments to Vietnam. It wasn't something that one looked forward to doing. I have a couple of other things to mention.

Vern Penner and I found that the Polish Political Adviser, a civilian, loved to play bridge. He said that there were some other bridge players in his delegation. So we decided to set up weekly bridge games. We would play at our place or at their place. If it was at our place, we would fix a small dinner for them. They really enjoyed it. They were good bridge players. We had a good time, with lots of jokes. We found that we could take any of the so-called standard Polish jokes, or ethnic jokes of any sort, and just make them Russian jokes, and the Poles thought that they were absolutely hilarious! It was rather evident that there was no love lost in that crowd for the Russians. But it kind of lightened the day for the Poles, and it was pleasant.

I should say that in dealing with the Communist Delegations, I ran afoul of our own Security people on one occasion. I was at a reception given by the Polish Ambassador

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for the ICCS, the Four Party Joint Military Commission, and so on. When it came time to go home, one of these Polish friends offered me a ride in his chauffeur-driven car, which, of course, had been provided by the South Vietnamese Government, with a South Vietnamese Government Intelligence Service driver. The Pole dropped me off at our apartment.

A week or two later one of the Security Officers in the Embassy made an appointment, came down to see me, and said that on such and such a night he understood that I was riding with the Political Adviser to the Polish Delegation to the ICCS and that this fellow took me to my apartment. He said, "Tell me, have you written up a report on that contact with that Communist official?" I said, "Well, in a sense, I have, as a matter of fact. That evening there was some information that I picked up in the course of the reception. I reported this in a telegram which Mr. Josiah Bennett, the Political Counselor, signed off on. In fact, Bennett was at the same reception I was at. He was talking to Poles and Hungarians, too. Have you asked him whether he has reported his contacts?"

I said, "You realize that my job requires me to deal with Poles and Hungarians every day of the week, in my office, in their offices, and on social occasions." He said, "Well, you're required to write up every contact." I said, "Like hell I will! I'd spend all my time writing up useless contact reports." Well, he was insistent. I asked him to go talk to Joe Bennett and ask him if he was willing to write up his contacts with Communist officials. If Joe was willing to do this, I would do what he does, if he tells me to do it. But he doesn't have to deal with the Poles and Hungarians every day as I do, and as do my officers here. I said, "We've been doing this for three months, and this is the first time that you've become aware of the fact that we're dealing with Communist officials?" This was one of those examples of the ridiculousness of some of our security regulations. He couldn't understand why I wasn't going through proper procedures in reporting contacts with Communist officials.

Well, it was an interesting period of time. I think that we've devoted enough time to that.

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Q: What came next after June, 1973, when your period of temporary duty at the Embassy in Saigon came to an end?

HELBLER: Well, that was at the end of July, 1973. At the end of June, 1973, I was given orders to report immediately back to Washington, where I would be Special Assistant to the Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs.

Q: This was Phil Habib?

HELBLER: No, at this point it was to be Mac Godley, George McMurtrie Godley.

Q: Oh, that's right. That's a fruitful subject. Go ahead.

HELBLER: I wired Joan back in Kuala Lumpur, asking her to start packing. I said that I would be home on a Friday night, and we would have to leave on Sunday for Washington. We did this. We made very brief farewells in KL. Obviously, we had no luxury trip home. We went straight to Washington. That wrapped up that experience in Saigon.

The next subject is my three years from about July 2, 1973, to September, 1976.

Q: OK, we'll take it up then. Thank you very much.

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Today is August 9, 1996. This is a continuation of the interview with John Helble. John, carry it on from there, if you will.

HELBLER: As I said, I reported for duty in the EA Front Office about July 2, 1973, in the position of Special Assistant to the Assistant Secretary in the Bureau of East Asian Affairs.

The Assistant Secretary-designate was Mac Godley, who previously had been Ambassador to Laos. Godley had chosen me to be his Special Assistant on the

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recommendation of Bill Sullivan [William Healy Sullivan]. I spent just over three years in this position. During that time I served, in succession, Mac Godley for about six weeks, and we will shortly learn why it was such a short period; Art Hummel, the Acting Assistant Secretary for EA, following Godley's departure, for about two months; Bob Ingersoll, whom I served for about eight months, the former CEO [Chief Executive Officer] and President of Borg-Warner in Chicago, who came to this job after 19 months as Ambassador to Japan; Art Hummel again for a month, while Art was Acting Assistant Secretary; Philip Habib for 22 months, who had been Ambassador to the Republic of Korea; Bill Gleysteen, who was Acting Assistant Secretary for about one month, following Habib's elevation to be Under Secretary for Political Affairs, the top career position in the Department; and two more months with Art Hummel, who returned from being Ambassador to Ethiopia and was designated Assistant Secretary for East Asian Affairs.

In the Special Assistant position I replaced Paul Cleveland, who was later Ambassador to New Zealand. I overlapped with Cleveland for several days. On the first day Cleveland told me that we had a meeting with all of the East Asian Bureau secretaries—about 40 of them. He explained that they had a wide range of grievances. He and the Executive Director of the EA Bureau, who was in charge of its administration, were meeting jointly with the secretaries to hear their grievances and complaints.

Q: These were mainly—or entirely—women?

HELBLE: They were all women. The meeting lasted for about three hours. I was stunned by the hostility and the strong sentiments expressed in virtually every corner of the room where this meeting was held—about working conditions, about supervisors' attitudes, etc. It was quite a shocker, and I thought, "Man, have I stepped into something that is pretty deep here." Well, I spent much of the next three years, working with the Executive Director of the Bureau, trying to address some of these grievances, improve some of the conditions, and solve some of the problems, not all of which were solvable.

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Q: Who was the Executive Director of the Bureau at this time?

HELBLE: It was Ernie Colantonio, who had been Minister-Counselor for Administrative Affairs in Saigon when I got there six months earlier for temporary duty. We were able to take the edge off many of the grievances and concerns of the secretaries. Things gradually improved, but it made an impression on me on my first day as Special Assistant that it was important to address staff morale and other problems.

The next day on the job Godley called me into his office and said, "I understand that you know Dick Moose," who at that time was a senior member of the staff of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, which was chaired by Senator J. William Fulbright (Moose had earlier resigned from the Foreign Service). Moose was a fellow Arkansan and had been selected by Fulbright, probably at least in part because of that connection. Godley explained that his nomination as Assistant Secretary for EA was in trouble before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Senator Fulbright had four appointees who were in some difficulty before his Committee in connection with the nomination/approval process. One of them was Charles S. Whitehouse, who had been Deputy Ambassador in Saigon under Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker and had been nominated as Ambassador to Laos. Another one was Ambassador William H. Sullivan, who had previously been Ambassador to Laos and has also been a Deputy Assistant Secretary of EA for Southeast Asia and was now slated to go to the Philippines as Ambassador. Another was Graham Martin, who had been Ambassador to Italy and had been nominated to go to Saigon to replace Ambassador Bunker. Another was Godley himself, who had been nominated to be Assistant Secretary for East Asian Affairs.

Godley asked me to set up a lunch with Moose and see what I could learn about Senator Fulbright's intentions. I did so. Moose told me that Senator Fulbright clearly intended to get at least one pound of flesh out of this exercise. He indicated that the Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, had requested Senator Fulbright to release the nomination of Graham Martin to go to Saigon as Ambassador, because the Secretary thought it was terribly

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important to get an Ambassador in Saigon to replace Ambassador Bunker as soon as possible. Averell Harriman, a senior officer of the Department and former Governor of New York, had long been a protector of Bill Sullivan. Reportedly, Harriman had persuaded Senator Fulbright to let Bill Sullivan off the hook. Moose said that it appeared that Charles S. Whitehouse, having simply been Deputy Ambassador in Saigon, was too small a fish to fry for Senator Fulbright's taste. He would probably let Whitehouse go on to Vientiane as Ambassador to Laos. That left Godley, of course.

Never in recorded history, as far as anybody could recall, had the Senate Foreign Relations Committee refused to confirm the appointment of a senior Foreign Service Officer to a position such as Assistant Secretary of State. However, Moose indicated that Senator Fulbright was determined to make some statement by his Committee's action, reflecting his disapproval of U. S. policies in Southeast Asia. That was the tying thread for these four nominations.

Q: So Senator Jesse Helms Republican, North Carolina has not been the only Senator who played games with ambassadorial nominations.

HELBLER: That's correct. Senator Fulbright was determined to get one of these four and make this statement.

For the next seven days the issue was in doubt. It appeared as though there could be a tie vote in the 16-member Senate Foreign Relations Committee—or there could be a swing, one way or the other, by one vote. Godley was, of course, very concerned about this situation. The day of the vote in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee came, and the results were seven in favor of Godley and nine against. So it was something of a precedent that a senior career officer was turned down at that level of appointment by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Q: Did Senator Fulbright ever indicate what the reason was for his opposition to Godley?

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HELBLER: Godley indicated that in his judgment...

Q: Godley had been Ambassador to Laos.

HELBLER: He had been Ambassador to Laos. He had been known as a very dynamic personality. There were media reports that from his limousine in Vientiane he would call on the telephone in the car to arrange bombing raids on various targets in Laos. Senator Fulbright reportedly thought that Godley had played a very key role in what Fulbright regarded as the mess in Southeast Asia. His animosity toward Godley was allegedly predicated on Godley's service in Vientiane, Laos.

In any event, this left Godley hanging out to dry. He had been nominated to be Assistant Secretary several months before, had been Assistant Secretary-Designate, replacing Ambassador Marshall Green, who had already departed to be Ambassador to Australia. Five or six weeks after Godley's nomination as Assistant Secretary for EA was defeated in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, he asked President Nixon to withdraw his nomination. Art Hummel then became Acting Assistant Secretary for EA.

Godley, of course, had no official standing in the Bureau prior to the vote in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee—and certainly none afterwards. He always had to be careful not to sign anything related to the position of Assistant Secretary, which he was expected to fill. After the vote in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Godley became even more cautious about giving orders, instructions, and so on.

There was some thought that the White House might take this matter to the floor of the Senate, and, under other circumstances, this might have been done. However, already, by July, 1973, there was a little issue called Watergate. This involved a complex of confused matters left over from the reelection campaign of President Nixon in 1972 which ultimately led to his resignation as President. This issue was bubbling in the media and in political circles, and the White House, under Richard Nixon, was already feeling some of the heat.

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The White House clearly made the decision that, whatever political capital it might have in Congress, it was not going to expend it for a career officer nominated to be Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian Affairs.

This process took some five or six weeks to sort out and to become clear. Of course, no statement was ever made to this effect. It became evident that the White House was not going to fight the vote in the Senate Foreign Relations committee adverse to Mac Godley. So Godley faded from the scene in a very awkward way for all concerned.

Q: Did Godley retire then?

HELBLE: He did not retire. He later served as Ambassador to Lebanon.

Q: As I recall, Senator Fulbright commented that he had no objection to Godley's being Ambassador somewhere else—but not in Southeast Asia.

HELBLE: That's right. Something to that effect.

So Art Hummel continued to serve as the Acting Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian Affairs until early November, 1973, when Robert D. Ingersoll arrived from Tokyo to become the new Assistant Secretary for EA. Ingersoll certainly could have told me, "John, I'd like to pick my own Special Assistant." He seemed to be considering exercising that authority when he first arrived in the Bureau. However, he said to me that we would work together for a month and he would make his decision then about whether he would keep me in the job as Special Assistant. I thought that I might be out on the street very shortly. At the end of November Ingersoll indicated that he would be happy to keep me. So I continued to work for him for eight months.

Ingersoll was a very decent person. He was a businessman with a flair for detail but a nearly total lack of understanding of the broad picture in the foreign policy area. He had an essentially weak grasp of the intricacies of the East Asian countries which he would

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be responsible for in terms of following the situations there in his position as Assistant Secretary. He had spent time in Australia on business. He had been Ambassador to Japan for 19 months. However, for example, I remember a staff meeting he had with the Deputy Assistant Secretaries of State for EA and myself. After some explanation that there was again a problem between Vietnam and Cambodia, he said, "Oh, I didn't realize that there were problems between the Cambodians and the Vietnamese. How long has this been going on?" That showed a complete lack of understanding of some fairly fundamental elements...

Q: The answer is, "centuries."

HELBLER: Exactly, centuries. In any event he treated me decently. He was very intent on cutting Bureau costs. If he walked by the xerox copier room, which was not too far from his office, and he saw the light on, he would turn it off—even though a secretary would come by, perhaps two minutes later, and have to turn the light back on in the copier room. I explained to him at one point that studies I had read stated that you can leave a light bulb burning for one hour and it will not consume as much electricity as it will if you turn it off and turn it right back on. Turning a light bulb on will consume at least an hour's worth of electricity. I suggested that he just leave the copier room light on.

After he had been in the office for about seven weeks I arranged for a trip which he wanted to make to all of the EA countries, including China, with which we did not have a formal relationship at that point. However, there had been some senior level visits. The Chinese played games with us until 24 hours before we were scheduled to go on what was to be a 42 day trip. We had to cancel out the visit to China, which was to have been the first stop. We would have been flying in from Paris, which was the most convenient way to get to China at that time. The Chinese visas did not come through, so we just turned the whole trip around and we had quite a mess.

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Nevertheless, we went to all of the other 16 countries in the area. We had 42 stops at various places. His wife accompanied Ingersoll at his own expense. In his economy drive Ingersoll said that we would all fly Economy Class. He was a 6'3", long-legged fellow. However, he put up with it. My problem was that I had a lot of classified material that I had to work with on each leg of the trip. I was always sitting next to some stranger. It was difficult for me to work and read my materials. But he insisted on going Economy Class. He had imposed the rule in his own corporation that, if you were going to fly less than eight hours, it would be in Economy Class. Even though a couple of legs of our trip were more than eight hours long, he stuck to Economy Class throughout the trip. It was an interesting trip but totally exhausting. I was his only staffer, trying to prepare talking points, toasts, and thank you's at each stop. I had to run the finances of the trip to make sure that Mrs. Ingersoll had petty cash available in local currency for each stop.

Q: Didn't he use credit cards?

HELBLE: No credit cards. Well, this trip was made in January, 1974. We came back in mid- February, 1974. In many respects that trip was kind of the highlight of my experience with Ingersoll. He used me quite a bit but not as much as his successor did. I never had to look for work, but the kinds of things that I was doing were frequently of less interest than those I handled during the following two years.

As I said, Ingersoll went on to be Deputy Secretary of State, and Art Hummel was again Acting Assistant Secretary for about one month. Then Phil Habib was assigned. He called me from his post in Korea, where he was Ambassador. He indicated that he would like me to stay on as Special Assistant, so at least there was no period of suspense in that case, as to whether I would have a job or not.

My daily routine, whether under Ingersoll or his successors, always included, first thing in the morning, the meeting between the Assistant Secretary and his four Deputy Assistant Secretaries, which I also attended. We went over the issues and work plan of the day,

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the deadlines to be met, etc. The rest of the day could involve just about anything. Under Phil Habib it did. It could involve something substantive, EA front office or EA Bureau administration, or inter-agency coordination or coordination with other elements in the Department on behalf of the Assistant Secretary.

All of these duties were essentially new to me. I had had no previous experience in other jobs with much of that type of work. So it was interesting and always challenging in that respect. Throughout this time I had the opportunity to deal with very senior people, both in the Department, as well as with all of our Ambassadors in East Asia, many of whom would come back on consultation. We would accommodate them, frequently in the front office of the Bureau, if we had a vacant office available. In any event, they would be around. I got to know all of them quite well.

We had Chiefs of Mission meetings, which were held in East Asia three times during this assignment—twice in Honolulu and once in Hong Kong. Habib favored Honolulu, at the CINCPAC Commander in Chief, Pacific headquarters facilities there. The Ambassadors, of course, and senior people from Washington would come to those Chiefs of Mission meetings. I became accustomed to dealing with very senior people and certainly lost any feeling of intimidation as a result of that. I think that that's a growth requirement that you have to get through at some point in your career. Certainly, that experience facilitated that degree of maturation.

I also had the opportunity to compare the effectiveness and styles of both the career Ambassadors and Ambassadors who were political appointees. We usually had three or four political appointees among the Ambassadors in the EA region, at any given time. Q: Did you have any impression that there was a real difference in the quality and capacity of non-career Ambassadors, as opposed to career Ambassadors?

HELBLER: I unreservedly came to the conclusion that the career Ambassadors were far more effective and much better qualified. They contributed far more meaningfully to

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policy. There were a couple of political appointee Ambassadors during that time who were adequate. The tendency of political appointees is to flog the myth to anyone who was willing to listen that they have direct connections to the White House and that they have special influence with the President which career officers lack. In most cases I have in mind this was a myth. These non-career Ambassadors seemed to suggest that their alleged access to the President could be very beneficial to the country where they were serving as Ambassador. That is, if they were in Canberra, they seemed to suggest that Australia would benefit from having a political appointee who had influence in the White House. I think that in most cases this was significantly overstated as a factor. I found that only rarely did a political appointee effectively use that influence, if he ever had it, in any meaningful sense.

Of course, we had a couple of real disasters who were political appointee Ambassadors. For example, there was Ambassador William R. Kintner in Bangkok 1973-1975. He was a total disaster. Because he was a political appointee it was more difficult to extract him from the post—that is, fire him —than would have been the case with a career Ambassador. However, he committed one too many really egregious acts which gave us the lever to pry him loose and persuade anybody who might have been his protector at the White House that we could not afford to have this fellow in Bangkok.

The job of Special Assistant provided me with an opportunity to observe and learn from the very senior people who operate at the top levels of the Foreign Service and the Department of State. That was certainly a learning opportunity which was not lost on me.

When Phil Habib came in as Assistant Secretary, I had known him to some extent in Vietnam. Habib was one of a kind. Subordinate officers who subsequently might have tried to emulate his style would not have been successful in doing so. I saw an occasional example of this. He was a dynamo. He was very tough but was equally loyal and supportive of his staff. He was demanding at all times, and praise was something that did not come naturally to him. As a matter of fact I noticed, after about two months of

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weekly staff meetings of the EA Bureau, that, while he had been critical of every one of the 14 Country Directors present at these meetings at one time or another, challenged them, or grumbled about something that had been done, he never once expressed appreciation to any of these people. They were also senior officers, and this included the Deputy Assistant Secretaries, who were even more senior.

—

I talked to Habib about the issue of occasionally rendering a bit of praise to his staff. Well, in his characteristic way, he grumbled and said, “Ah, they don't need it. However, if you think that they should have some praise, why don't you give me a note before every staff meeting as to somebody I could say something good about regarding something he did that week.” So I regularly did that. I surveyed the scene. If somebody had taken on a very difficult, briefing paper for the Secretary of State or did one thing or another, I'd put this in front of Phil. He would dutifully read it off. His tone didn't suggest that he was necessarily sincere about it, but in any event he had said the words.

Just to jump ahead, I will mention one incident that happened about 18 months after we'd been working together. Of course, he had never once said a good thing to me about anything that I had done. He had given me a very tight deadline to draft some telegram to the field. I put it together. About 9:00 PM I took it into his office in final. He looked it over, signed it, and handed it back without comment. So I said, “Phil, was that telegram OK?” He said, “I signed it, didn't I?” I said, “Yes, you did, but it would be nice if once in a while you told me that I had done a good job.” He said, “Of course you're doing a good job. You're still here, aren't you?” Well, that was his style. I lived off that comment for the rest of our working relationship.

The opportunities for work with Phil expanded in variety and involved increasingly substantive projects. The instructions were always clearly delivered. In almost every case the deadlines were extremely tight. It gave me an opportunity to get into many substantive

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areas that I previously had little exposure to or responsibility for. That, of course, was helpful to me and made the job more interesting. The working hours under Habib were even worse than they were under Ingersoll. I worked about a 10 hour day under Ingersoll. Under Habib 12 hours a day was the normal practice. Under Ingersoll it was 5 1/2 days a week. Under Habib it was generally 6 1/2 days a week. I never got any vacation. So it was a wearing experience. Phil didn't believe in vacations.

At one point, to jump ahead chronologically a little bit, I had been in the job about a year. Phnom Penh and Saigon had just fallen to the Communists. Phil had twice been told by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to take some leave, but he did not do so on either occasion. So a week after the fall of Saigon April 30, 1975 Kissinger called him up and said, "You will take at least one week of leave." Phil said to me that this was the third time that the Secretary had ordered him to take some leave. He said, "I'm in big trouble if I don't do it this time." So, grudgingly, he said, "I'm going to take, not a week, as Henry said, but four days off."

Well, of course, wouldn't you know, two days after he went off on leave, the SS MAYAGUEZ incident occurred off the coast of Cambodia. This involved the seizure of a U. S. ship by the Communist authorities in Cambodia.

Q: When was this?

HELBLE: About the second week of May, 1975. In any event the matter was rather quickly resolved. As I will mention later, both during the evacuation of our Embassy in Phnom Penh and, later on, during the evacuation of our Embassy in Saigon I was responsible for setting up and managing a task force in the Operation Center for those two episodes, under Phil Habib's direction. In connection with the MAYAGUEZ incident I was again summoned and instructed to set up a task force to deal with it. However, I barely got the task force together and operational when the incident ended. Phil came back from his vacation a day early. He was livid. He wanted to know what the hell had happened and

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how did this ever occur. He said that it would never have happened if he hadn't been on leave. That was his position. He said, "That does it! I'm never taking another day's leave."

Q: He had a point about the MAYAGUEZ affair. This ship used to come into Bangkok during the time I was there, from 1975 to 1979. I think that about four years ago I was up in Portsmouth, VA, for a meeting of the Coast Guard Auxiliary. I saw the MAYAGUEZ up there being refitted. It was a container ship owned by the Sea-Land Corporation. I've never understood and I always intended to go down and talk to the captain and say, "How in the hell did the Cambodians ever get on your ship?" A ship of that size—about 20,000 or 25,000 tons—would cruise at about 15 or 20 knots and was pretty high out of the water. What could the Cambodians do against it? It's true that the Cambodian gunboat that shot at the MAYAGUEZ had a 37 or 40 mm gun. They could pump a few rounds into it, but they couldn't stop a ship like that. That ship will take several torpedoes and stay afloat. I think that it was simply a case of bad judgment on the part of the captain. I never have understood that. It was such a dumb thing to do.

HELBLE: Habib, of course, was a very tough and articulate character. This came to bear most importantly early in 1975. I can remember that in January, 1975, over a 14 day period, we had something like 22 Congressional hearings to attend. I accompanied him to all of them. Phil would sit down and, particularly if he knew that the Committee was likely to be hostile—or somebody on the Committee was likely to be hostile—he laid in wait for his opportunity. These hearings were all on the issue of Indochina assistance—military or economic—as well as a few, related issues.

I remember in particular one hearing chaired by Senator Ted Kennedy [Democrat, Massachusetts]. We knew that this was going to be an especially difficult hearing. The hearing hadn't been going on for more than three minutes when Senator Kennedy asked some question or made some statement that provoked Phil. At least, I thought that he had been provoked. As I learned subsequently, it was simply an excuse for Phil to take a position that he wanted to establish right at the outset. Phil would always tell a

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committee that he was just a simple, hard-working bureaucrat. He wasn't afraid to use the term, "bureaucrat." He said that he was a bureaucrat and was proud to be a bureaucrat. However, Phil also approached every one of these hearings with the profound confidence, and this was well-grounded, I might add, that he knew more about the subject under discussion than anybody on the Committee—or the entire Committee, put together. And this was almost always the case, for sure.

So Phil wasn't going to take any abuse from anybody, but whatever Senator Kennedy said triggered Phil, and Phil gave Kennedy a lecture that I couldn't believe. I was stunned. I'd never seen, heard, or seen on TV an administration figure from the Executive Branch of the government talk like this. You just don't do that. Phil rattled on for five minutes, on the attack. Kennedy responded, I would say, in a somewhat abashed manner. So the rest of the hearing went very smoothly. On the way back to the Department, I said, "Phil, why in the hell did you go after Kennedy like that right away?" He said, "I had to establish myself, and I'm not letting that son of a bitch or anybody else push me around" That was his style, and he meant it. But he had the brains, the knowledge, and the will to back it up.

Q: John, that raises a point about Phil's testimony before a committee. What did you do about recording that? Presumably, there was a committee staff recording the testimony. Were they pretty good? Would they have a version of the testimony fairly quickly?

HELBLE: Yes.

Q: You might make some notes but, on the whole, you could rely...

HELBLE: No, I didn't make notes, generally, unless there was some point made by some Congressman or Senator that, I thought, Phil might want to report to the Secretary of State. But we got transcripts of the hearings, and they were real transcripts. I would generally have to go over them and clean them up or make any adjustments.

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I'd like to talk about some of the issues that Phil had to deal with during the 22 months I worked with him as Assistant Secretary. These included, of course, the Indochina question and the China issue.

Indochina, of course, started its very apparent slide to oblivion from the point of view of the American presence and influence in January, 1975. Congress became unreceptive to expanding or even sustaining American economic and military assistance to the area, and most notably to Vietnam. However, this attitude also impacted significantly on the situation in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. In fact, by January, 1975, the military situation in Cambodia was deteriorating very rapidly. The supply convoys going up the Mekong River to Phnom Penh, transiting South Vietnam, were increasingly attacked and interfered with by the communists. Ultimately, to all intents and purposes, it became almost impossible to run them through. This started to impact significantly on both the food and materiel situation in Phnom Penh, and morale was adversely affected. It was very difficult to get weapons and munitions into Phnom Penh. There was some airlifting, but the Phnom Penh airport was under fire from time to time. Flights had to be postponed.

The Ambassador in Phnom Penh at this time was John Gunther Dean, a senior career officer who had significant, previous senior level experience. Dean was a rather unusual individual. He could be extremely difficult to deal with, from the point of view of the Department of State, and particularly from Habib's point of view. We frequently had late night phone calls from Ambassador Dean, pleading and screaming for action on one subject or another. Phil became weary of these calls and, on numerous occasions, asked me to deal with Ambassador Dean on the phone. Frankly, I had the feeling that Dean sometimes lacked a degree of coherency which I would have expected, but, of course, he was under extreme pressure in a country that was collapsing around him, with the communists closing in around the capital city. That would have been a very difficult situation for anyone. But Dean was very demanding and very difficult for Phil to deal with on a number of occasions.

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Ambassador Dean was a career officer. The other career officer who gave Phil particular problems was Graham Martin, our last Ambassador to South Vietnam. If you look at Graham Martin's personnel record, you realize that there is something of a question as to what extent he was a real career officer. Nevertheless, he was considered a career officer.

Graham Martin was one of a kind, and the world is better off being reassured of that. [Laughter] He was very arrogant and intolerant of differences of views. He thought that the universe centered around him, his Mission, and Vietnam. He could be very effective and very persuasive in dealing with people. He was certainly so in dealing with Secretary of State Henry Kissinger on a number of occasions. There were repeated cases where Martin wanted to take a certain course of action, Habib opposed it, and Kissinger had to make the decision. On a number of those occasions Kissinger sided with Ambassador Martin, to Phil Habib's distress. This was particularly so because, by and large, on most issues and in most situations, Kissinger took Habib's advice, but these issues involved different circumstances. During his tenure as Ambassador in Saigon Martin seemed to spend almost as much time in Washington as he did in Saigon. He was persuaded, it appeared, that the war was going to be won or lost in Washington, rather than in Saigon. To some extent he wasn't wrong.

Q: Or not entirely wrong.

HELBLE: Not entirely wrong. The Embassy in Saigon under Ambassador Martin was run as a very tight ship, and dissent was really not allowed.

In the fall of 1974 Dick Moose, to whom I referred to previously, and a colleague of his, Chuck Meissner, both of whom were members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee staff, were sent by Senator Fulbright to do a report on conditions in Vietnam. I was assigned to be Washington coordinator and liaison person for this two person team and assisted them with preparations, briefings, documentation, etc., prior to their departure for Saigon. Upon their return from Vietnam I was instructed to go to their office and read

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their report prior to its issuance as a public document. My job was to remove any classified material from it, since it would be an UNCLASSIFIED report. I was designated to serve in that capacity on behalf of all of the Washington agencies involved, including the CIA and the Defense Department.

I was not allowed to bring a copy of the report back to the State Department. I read the report, made one or two deletions, returned to the Department, and immediately drafted a memorandum for Habib and Bob Wenzel, who was the Country Director for Vietnam at the time, as well as for the supervising Deputy Assistant Secretary. Ambassador Graham Martin was once again in the Department at that time, and I provided a copy of this memorandum to him. This was at approximately 1:00 PM. Ambassador Martin came back from lunch at about 1:15 PM. He read the memorandum and came immediately to my office. Among the items that I had noted and reported in my memorandum was that the Moose-Meissner report was very critical of the reporting from the Embassy in Saigon. The report indicated that there was a number of Political Officers in Saigon involved in the reporting process who were distressed that certain types of reporting were not being permitted to be sent to the Department by Ambassador Martin and that the reporting was being tailored to cast a more favorable light on the South Vietnamese and the situation as a whole than these Political Officers thought was warranted. They mentioned specific reports which might have called into question the performance of the South Vietnamese Army, officials, and one thing or another. The Moose-Meissner report indicated that, in their judgment, this was a function in effect of censorship and control exercised by Ambassador Martin.

Q: When was this report prepared?

HELBLE: I would say that it was in about November, 1974. Well, Ambassador Martin came into my office. He was livid. He sat down, and we had an hour and a half of real donnybrook discussion. I knew, for a fact, that indeed this sort of dissent existed among younger officers in the Embassy in Saigon. After all, I had known enough about that

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Embassy for some time to have some background on the subject. Beyond that, these officers would be transferred or would come home on consultation or home leave. I would often talk to them and I knew what their views were. It was Ambassador Martin's position that I had been the influence on Moose and Meissner on this subject. In response to my protestations that at no time during the preparation of the Moose-Meissner trip to Saigon or after their return were these matters raised at all with me. They had picked up these views from people on Ambassador Martin's staff.

Q: It wasn't hard to do.

HELBLE: It wasn't hard to do. But he could not believe and would not accept the proposition that these were valid views from officers in the Embassy and that it had to be the result of the poisonous influence of this Special Assistant back in Washington. In other words, me, since I knew Dick Moose personally and, Martin thought, I had probably confided these views to him.

Q: Didn't you say earlier that Dick Moose was in your class at the FSI [Foreign Service Institute]?

HELBLE: Yes. Dick Moose and I joined the Foreign Service together. Of course, Dick resigned from the Foreign Service in the late 1960's and joined the staff of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. In any event, this discussion with Ambassador Martin covered a very unpleasant hour and a half. The more aggressive Ambassador Martin became, of course, the deeper I dug in on my positions. I was quite critical of him, to his face, and told him that he was not doing the Foreign Service, his Mission, the Department of State, or his country a service by limiting the views being expressed by curtailing the reporting of information which was relevant to a proper understanding of the situation and denying that information to Washington. Well, his position at that point was that, to the extent that anybody may have said this in Saigon to Moose and Meissner, these were junior officers who didn't understand the situation.

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Of course, that was Ambassador Martin's standard approach. That is, only he had the proper perspective at the time on the entire range of issues and policy requirements. Therefore, only he could have absorbed all of this information, digested it, and spewed it out properly in its total perspective. However, people down the line in the Embassy could not possibly understand the range of implications for policy. They were just parochial in their interests. So, for the next 12 days, Ambassador Martin came into my office, every day, sat down, and we discussed these issues for an hour, but the heat had gone out of the discussion. Now he was in his wooing mode, which he was famous for—trying to sweet talk people into supporting his position. It wasn't as unpleasant for the next 12 sessions, but our respective positions didn't change. It certainly had an impact on my work day to have this Ambassador come in, sit down for an hour, and keep me from what was a very busy agenda.

Q: And he was senior enough so that you couldn't say, "Get out of here."

HELBLE: That's right.

Q: If you'd been Phil Habib, you would have said that.

HELBLE: Right. Well, of course, he went to Phil after the first session he had with me and expressed his outrage and conviction that I was responsible for the Moose-Meissner report. Phil told him, in no uncertain terms, to bugger off and that Helble wasn't the problem. He said, "You have to solve your own problems, but this has nothing to do with Helble. He's just the messenger here." And that's what I was—the messenger.

Ambassador Martin never accepted that. From that point on, for the next six months before the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975, he was very hostile toward me and toward Phil Habib. In fact, after the discussions he had with me and his return to Saigon the next time he came back, he went to Habib and said, "You've got to fire that guy," meaning me. Habib told him that he would decide who was going to be on his staff. Ambassador Martin then

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went to Bob Ingersoll, who had been my boss as Assistant Secretary of State for EA, and was now the Deputy Secretary of State. Ingersoll told him, in effect, the same thing that Habib had said. He said, "That's up to Phil Habib."

Then Ambassador Martin went to General Brent Scowcroft, who was the National Security Adviser to President Ford. He said, "There's a 'bad' guy over in the East Asian Bureau who's leaking everything all over town, and we've got to get rid of him." I don't know exactly what Scowcroft's personal reaction was to this, but he had some senior member of his staff call me and challenge me on a totally unrelated issue. He became rather threatening. I suspected, and this was later confirmed, that this was related to the allegations made by Ambassador Martin. In any case the particular issue being challenged was not difficult for me to defend at all, and the NSC [National Security Council] staff dropped the whole issue.

After the fall of Saigon Ambassador Martin took some leave, wandering through Europe, delaying his return to Washington until late summer, 1975. Martin started a campaign which we became aware of, directed in particular against Habib and Helble. He said that he was considering a suit for slander and various other things. A number of the people that he was saying this to reported it back to Phil.

Then Martin did one more thing which I found rather sad, from his point of view. The annual Foreign Service Promotion Boards were scheduled to convene, and, I guess, I was more or less due for a promotion. I hadn't thought much about it. After the boards had completed their work, two members of the Panel reviewing the most senior Foreign Service Officers came to me and said that Graham Martin had talked to a couple of members of the Panel reviewing my file and told them what a bad hat I was, that I shouldn't be promoted. These two members of the Panel reported to me that the two other members of the Panel to whom Graham Martin had spoken took a firm position against my promotion, and that I would not be promoted.

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Of course, in this day and age that would have provoked an immediate grievance case. I just sort of shrugged it off and said, "The poor, bloody bastard. He's got to go to this length. He doesn't know that I no longer care about these things."

Q: Did you tell Phil Habib about this?

HELBLE: Oh, yes. It was a vendetta that was very peculiar in its origins, very peculiarly raised on Martin's part, and really a sad commentary that he would devote this much time to it. I was puzzled that he would devote so much attention to a relatively junior officer...

Q: When he had a major complaint...

HELBLE: A major complaint on his platter, and it was all falling apart.

Q: You know, it's so pathetic because, as I understand it, the Selection Board simply rates a given Class, say, from 1 to 230. That's all they do. Then the question of who's promoted is where they draw the line, and that's a function of the budget. You could rank somebody further down the list...

HELBLE: That's what happened.

Q: It's so absurd and ridiculous and such a violation of the whole program.

HELBLE: Oh, of course. In any event, if I had been distressed, I certainly wouldn't show it to let him know that I was very unhappy. It was sad but interesting to see how life spins around. Well, enough of Graham Martin, although one could go on for a long, long time about his idiosyncrasies.

Q: I have a couple of stories but I won't go into them.

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HELBLE: People like John Gunther Dean and Graham Martin were very difficult people for Phil Habib to manage during this period of crisis. If anybody could manage them, Phil could, and did so very well.

I mentioned the MAYAGUEZ incident. What I didn't mention was that during the last 15 days before the fall of Phnom Penh and the last 30 days or so prior to the fall of Saigon I had another one of these intensive requirements to handle. Phil came back to the office on about March 29, 1975, from a meeting with Secretary Kissinger. Of course, as I said, the situation—particularly in Phnom Penh—was rapidly falling apart. In late 1974 the situation in Phnom Penh had become very difficult. By early January, 1975, it became worse. By the middle of March, 1975, the final North Vietnamese offensive in South Vietnam started. Just prior to that, in the last week of February, 1975, the White House was desperate to have more aid voted by Congress to South Vietnam and Cambodia. As a last gasp, it was decided to try to organize a group of Senators and Congressmen to fly to Vietnam and Phnom Penh to see the situation for themselves, in the hope that this would persuade Congress to vote at least some supplementary funding for Vietnam and Cambodia.

Phil, of course, was tasked with leading this group which consisted, as I recall, of six Congressmen and two Senators. I don't recall all of their names now, but, most notable in terms of a character was Congresswoman Bella Abzug, the buoyant, liberal lady from New York who wore a broad-brimmed hat on most occasions. She was very hostile to the whole subject of assistance to Indochina at that point. Much of Congress seemed disinclined to providing additional aid.

So we went off to Saigon on a U. S. Air Force plane. The trip took seven days, including travel time. There were five days spent in Saigon and one day in Phnom Penh. We did not overnight in Phnom Penh. We put the members of Congress through as many briefings and side trips as they wanted, and it was a good exposure for them. Phil had a lot of discussions with the members of the group on the plane. I noticed at the time of the takeoff from Andrews Air Force Base that Phil had seated himself at a table with Congresswoman

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Bella Abzug. I thought that this was another Kennedy type encounter. Phil was going to take her on right away. However, she behaved herself on the trip.

On the way home Phil told me to write a report on the trip for Secretary Kissinger. We were due to arrive at Andrews Air Force Base at 6:00 AM. Phil said, "I want the report on his desk at 8:00 AM." So I spent the night, as the plane flew back across the Pacific, writing the report. I woke Phil up at about 4:00 AM somewhere West of the Mississippi River and got him to read the report. He made whatever changes he wanted to make. I then called from the plane to my secretary, who lived in Rockville, MD, and asked her to be in the office at the Department of State by 6:00 AM. She was there. I arrived at the office a few minutes after she did and gave her the draft report, which she then typed up. I took it in to Phil to see if he wanted to see it again. He was asleep on a sofa in his office, so I just took it up to Secretary Kissinger's office.

What we had to report was simply that we didn't think we had made much progress. There might be some supplementary, economic assistance, but any further military assistance was out of the question.

So, two weeks after we came back from Saigon and Phnom Penh, the North Vietnamese attacked Ban Me Thuot in the Central Vietnam highlands north of Saigon and captured it. The rest is history. The situation in Vietnam deteriorated very rapidly as region after region fell to the communists. It was clear that ARVN morale had totally collapsed, as there was no longer any confidence. By the end of March, 1975, two weeks after the attack on Ban Me Thuot, and the rapid disintegration of ARVN capabilities in the I Corps area, with the eventual fall of Da Nang, Secretary Kissinger ordered Habib to chair a task force to prepare for the evacuation of both Phnom Penh, which had miraculously still held on, and Saigon.

Habib called me in and said, "I don't have time to handle this. You go up to the Operations Center, set up a task force, get interagency participation, line up the proper staff, organize

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it for 24 hour a day operation, and get started on it.” It was a real ball of wax, if I ever saw one, to have that kind of experience thrust on you. So I disappeared into the Seventh Floor Operations Center and, with only a couple of momentary exceptions, I spent the next 30 days and nights there, getting home once or twice a week, at most, for a change of clothes. I would then grab some clothes for the next seven days or so.

Of course, we had to have CIA and Department of Defense representation on the task force. We needed to have people from the Bureau of Intelligence Research in the Department, the Bureau of Consular Affairs, not to mention some of our own people from the Bureau of East Asian Affairs. We got together a secretarial staff to support them. I suppose that, generally speaking, we had 15-20 people present there 24 hours a day. We had something like 20 phone lines and a special phone number which was advertised around the U. S. People could call this number to express their concerns or obtain information about some relative in Saigon. Those phones were constantly lit up except for the period between 2:00 AM and 5:00 AM each day. We had a number of matters being discussed back and forth via cable with Saigon and phone calls to be made back and forth. The same thing with Da Nang before it fell.

It was another one of these wild and hectic scenes that seem to require stamina, first and foremost. If you could bring in any other talent to the situation, fine. Once in a while, as I referred to in connection with an earlier situation up in the Operations Center, I would be able to get an hour's nap on the cot up there.

Q: Did they finally get towels in that bathroom up there? When the bedroom in the Operations Center was opened up in about 1963, they just had paper towels! I took a shower there and had to dry myself with paper towels.

HELBLER: I can say that I never took a shower there. I can't recall whether there were towels.

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Q: I remember that on one occasion—I can't remember the issue or the task force involved up there in the Operations Center—the guys assigned to it actually got into the bed with their shoes on! [Laughter] You could see the marks from their shoes! How gross.

HELBLE: Of course, about April 14 or 15, 1975, if I recall correctly, Phnom Penh finally fell. The evacuation which Ambassador John Gunther Dean had managed from his end went off really quite well, under the circumstances. The cover of the following week's issue of Time magazine had the famous photo of Ambassador John Gunther Dean walking to one of the last helicopters with the folded American flag which had just been lowered at the Embassy. The country had fallen to the Khmer Rouge (the Cambodian Communists supported by Communist China).

The situation in Saigon deteriorated much more rapidly. So the end of the Vietnam conflict finally came on April 30, 1975. There was one, final episode on the evening of April 29, prior to the final announcement from the Pentagon that the last helicopter had left the Embassy. I was in the Operations Center at the State Department. Several times Ambassador Martin had telephoned to the Department during the final days, arguing that he should stay behind, somewhat like the captain on a sinking ship. The insistent orders had been, "You will depart with the rest of the evacuees." Martin made one last call, actually at about 1:00 AM of April 30. I was in the Operations Center and took the call. Ambassador Martin wanted to talk to Phil Habib, so I patched him through to Habib's house. I monitored the phone call. Martin was telling Habib that he was going to stay, that he was not going to allow himself to be evacuated.

Q: I might mention that, for the benefit of those who read this interview, monitoring a phone call is commonly done in the State Department. Secretaries, staff aides, and special assistants can pull up a little, white button on the cradle of the phone. You can hear everything, but the speaker in the phone is bypassed. Go ahead.

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HELBLE: Well, Phil said to Martin, "Your orders are to depart, and it is essential that you follow your orders." Martin refused to accept that. So Phil said, "Do you want to hear it from Secretary Kissinger directly?" Ambassador Martin said, "Yes, I'll talk to Kissinger." So this now became a three-way conversation, with me auditing from a silent phone. Secretary Kissinger was patched into the phone call. He was at home, of course. Ambassador Martin made his case for staying behind. Kissinger said, "You vill leave! The President wants you to leave. You vill leave!" It was a very emphatic and direct command, tolerating no further consideration for Ambassador Martin's position.

Martin apparently felt that his staying behind would somehow glorify his status to stay with the sinking ship. What he professed was that he thought that he could do something positive in working with the new North Vietnamese authorities in Saigon. Nobody else in the world thought that there was going to be anything gained by that, at that point, and that we would just have a constant, embarrassing problem over how to get Ambassador Martin out of Saigon.

Q: We'd have to pay for that.

HELBLE: Right. So, in any event, Ambassador Martin reluctantly left the Embassy.

Q: Carrying his little dog.

HELBLE: Late that day, on April 30, 1975, at about 6:30 PM, we had a call from the NMCC [National Military Command Center], saying that the last helicopter had left the roof of the Embassy in Saigon and that the evacuation had been completed. I called Secretary Kissinger's office and passed that message on. Then I called Phil Habib and said, "I'm going to close up the task force operation up here in the Operations Center and send everybody home." Then I went down to the EA Bureau. The 7:00 PM TV news program was just coming on, as I recall. Secretary Kissinger was delivering his announcement that the last helicopter had left the Embassy and that the evacuation was complete. As

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he was nearing the end of that announcement, my office phone rang. It was the NMCC, saying, "There still are two more helicopters on the roof of the Embassy." I was stunned. [Laughter] I didn't know what to say. The Secretary of State had just announced that all of the helicopters were gone, and the whole world was tuned in. In any event, they assured me that these two helicopters were the last, and they were leaving safely. I mentioned this to Phil and said, "Shall we call the Secretary?" He said, "No."

Q: I remember a great picture at the time. It showed lots of refugees trying to get onto a helicopter. There was a big American punching somebody in the face to keep him from getting on the helicopter. That was not on the Embassy roof. It was on the roof of an apartment house. There may have been some confusion about that.

HELBLE: That wraps up that operation. I went home to spend the first night at home for a month. I had dinner with my family, including our son, who was in first year of college, and our daughter, who would have been about 10 years old at that point. I told them briefly what had happened. There was a long silence, and then our son said to me, "Dad, it's all over, isn't it?" It was the only time in my life that I cried in front of my kids. It was a very emotional moment. I had spent a long stretch of time working on Vietnam.

Q: Sixteen years, off and on.

HELBLE: After the fall of Saigon and Indochina—well, Laos was not yet gone. The basic policy requirement seemed to be to try to reassure our friends in East Asia that we were not going to abandon the area and would stand firm with our interests, etc. This was not an easy task in the wake of what had just happened. There was a general view throughout East Asia, the region most directly affected, as well as elsewhere in the world, that something had happened to U. S. resolve, to our political will, and to popular attitudes in the United States. So there was a hollow ring to our efforts to reassure our friends and allies. However, following the MAYAGUEZ affair and Phil's brief vacation, we planned a trip to East Asia, primarily to reiterate our strong interest and determination to remain

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very much involved in East Asian affairs and to say that our friends should not doubt our resolve in the period ahead.

The Thai, of course, were extremely nervous, as they were now in a situation where they had exposed themselves significantly as U. S. allies during the Vietnam War. While the conventional wisdom was that the Vietnamese would not attack Thailand, nobody could be absolutely certain that that would not happen.

Q: The Thai didn't believe it.

HELBLE: I didn't believe that they would.

Q: The Thai didn't believe that the Vietnamese would not attack them. They thought that the Vietnamese might very well do so.

HELBLE: That's true. Thailand certainly looked like a pretty soft target, with a hard core of North Vietnamese sympathizers who had long been settled in the country.

So in June, 1975, Phil and I embarked on another trip to East Asia. The most notable stop was Vientiane, Laos. There had been discussions prior to our departure, and we discussed this further while we were en route to the area, as to whether Phil should go to Vientiane. The Pathet Lao and the communists in Laos, plus their supporters, had occupied a very substantial U. S. AID [Agency for International Development] compound in Vientiane. They refused to get out of it. For all intents and purposes there was no, non communist governmental authority or military capability left in Laos capable of withstanding a final push by the Pathet Lao. The situation was deteriorating very rapidly in the May-June, 1975, period.

En route to Vientiane, I counseled Phil not to go to Laos. I didn't think that there was anything that we could usefully do in terms of persuading the Laotian Government to take any particular action. The Royal Laotian Government was essentially hog-tied

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and helpless. I said that there really was a substantial risk, because there had been demonstrations in Vientiane. I said that Phil would probably be greeted at the airport by demonstrations. The authorities wouldn't be able to control them, and Phil might be taken hostage. Then the Pathet Lao would have one more feather in their cap. Well, Phil was not concerned. He said, "I've got to go there, I've got to see that Embassy, and I've got to see what's happening to our people," and so on.

Phil Chadbourn was the *Chargé d'Affaires*. We did not have an Ambassador there. We went to Vientiane. There was no demonstration at the airport, but it was clear that the situation was extremely tenuous for the American community, which principally consisted of official Americans and contract personnel. A number of Americans had been evacuated. The Embassy was still running in some fashion, but there was no aid program under way. AID personnel couldn't even get access to their warehouse in the area known as "Silver City."

We spent a day and a night in Vientiane. During that time Phil asked me if I would talk to as many Embassy people as I could to find out what their view of the situation was. What I found was that morale was something below zero, if that was possible. Confidence in Embassy leadership—and that meant the most senior person—was virtually non-existent.

Q: You mean confidence in Phil Chadbourn.

HELBLE: That's correct. There was a feeling that the Embassy was a leaderless ship, with no captain at the helm. Nobody seemed to know what was going to happen from day to day, and even from hour to hour. This attitude was so widespread that it was not difficult to fathom that attitude. There was no reporting being done in any detail. I knew some of the people assigned to the Embassy at the time. Most of them were pretty responsible people.

So we came, we saw, and we went away. We finished our trip, doing our best to reassure the various host governments. We returned to Washington. Phil Habib reported to Secretary Kissinger on what we found—particularly in Laos. He strongly recommended

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that we immediately transfer Phil Chadbourn out of Laos. Secretary Kissinger agreed, and Chadbourn was relieved and withdrawn, without prejudice.

Q: There wasn't much that he could have done, anyway.

HELBLE: No, there wasn't. Unfortunately, Chadbourn did not seem to have the type of stability suited to a leader or that gave confidence to the rest of the official Americans there that, regardless of how bad the situation was, there was still somebody there who was in control of the situation. So that was the first of many efforts in East Asia undertaken in various ways. We sent various other high level people out to the area at one point or another, continuing the reassurance business.

The Thai were particularly nervous. At that time we were already in the process of dismantling our air bases in Thailand which had been used in the Indochina war against the communists. This gave further concern to the Thai that we were abandoning the area. They were concerned that we would not fulfill whatever obligations that might have been interpreted as existing under the SEATO [Southeast Asian Treaty Organization] treaty to assist Thailand if the North Vietnamese came across their borders. To be perfectly candid, I don't know how in the hell we would have helped the Thai, given the political climate in the United States.

Q: I think you're quite right.

HELBLE: So the Thai concerns were justified, in my judgment. However, of course, the North Vietnamese did not cross the Mekong River into Thailand. Laos quietly fell to the communists. We were able to withdraw our people. However, Laos was always a different factor in the Indochina situation.

Q: Well, the outcome in Laos was always understood to be a function of the outcome in Saigon. Everyone understood this, and, I think, correctly.

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HELBLE: In the fall of 1975, while Phil Habib was still Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian Affairs, President Ford had sought to engage NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] in interests and activities beyond the confines of the NATO area. This was something which had not been done previously since the creation of the organization. Ford suggested, as a first step, that he would provide various experts to brief the North Atlantic Council on the East Asian situation. The first person designated as a briefer was Phil Habib.

The Bureau of East Asian Affairs also had a long-standing arrangement of having semi-annual discussions on East Asia with the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It was time for the French to host this exchange of views. So Phil asked me to set up a date with the North Atlantic Council and separately with the French for this purpose, so that we could get this done more or less at the same time.

I proceeded to set up a schedule. However, having been on the job with Phil for something around 18 or 19 months at that point, not having had a single day of vacation, and really feeling rather exhausted by all of these matters which we have just discussed, I slipped in to Phil a schedule which included time off for a weekend and one additional day. So we had a three-day gap between the briefing in Brussels for the North Atlantic Council and the talks with the French. I put the telegram before Phil which was to inform the appropriate posts in the field of our schedule. He just signed it, and I sent it off. About a week later I had received confirmation from the field that this schedule was fine for the parties involved.

Later, I showed Phil a draft schedule, which had us talking on a Friday morning in Brussels, flying to Paris Friday afternoon, and then having talks with the French on the following Tuesday. Habib looked at the schedule and said, "Helble, what the hell have you done? We've got three days between these two engagements! We can't fly back to Washington and then back to Paris." I said, "That's right, Phil. We can't do that, because it wouldn't make any sense at all. It would only leave us exhausted." So he said, "Well, why the hell did you set this up like this?" I said, "Why don't we just take three days off

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in Paris?" He looked at me with a fishy eye if I ever saw one. Then he said, "I've got a better idea. We'll go down to the Burgundy country and we'll eat some of the best food in the world." He said, "Call Mark Pratt in the Embassy in Paris." Mark was, in effect, the East Asia Political Officer in the Embassy in Paris, handling East Asian political matters. Phil said, "Pratt is a connoisseur of the finest food. He'll know what to do. He can set all of this up. Tell him to get an Embassy car if he can, and the three of us will go down to Burgundy." I said, "That sounds good to me."

So Mark Pratt set it all up. Phil knew exactly what I'd done to him and took it with good grace. However, he knew how to fill in the gaps. So for three days we traveled through Burgundy, staying at the H#tel de la Poste in one city and a nice hotel somewhere else. Primarily, the focus was on eating. The schedule was designed to accommodate, generally speaking, a Guide Michelin two-star restaurant for lunch and a three-star restaurant for dinner.

I had never been exposed to such food in my life. It was a real experience for me. Half the time I didn't know what I was eating, but it was magnificent. [Laughter] After two days of this I was already terribly bloated, but those other two guys didn't seem to be slowed down at all. With this food came very good wine. I remember one three-star restaurant where we had dinner. It was at the H#tel Les Fr#res Troisgros, in the city of Roanne, in the Department of the Loire. We had a magnificent meal—certainly, to this day, it was the best meal I have ever had. I picked up the check at the end of the dinner. We had superb wine. I remember that the cheapest wine we had was a white wine that only cost about \$175 a bottle. We had at least one bottle of red wine which cost over \$300. I put the entire bill on my American Express card. It cost \$1,275.00. (The others reimbursed me for their share!).

Q: For three people?

HELBLE: Actually, we had a fourth person that night, so it was for four people. I said to myself, "How will I ever explain to my wife that I put a \$1,275.00 bill on my American

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Express card for one dinner?" But it was a once in a lifetime experience, and I have no regrets. Of course, this happened in 1975, and an equivalent meal and wine now would cost more than \$1,275.00.

In any event, it was a great trip. We had a delightful three days. We had one more dinner at a three-star restaurant, the Taillevent, in the Eighth Arrondissement in Paris.

After the discussions with the French we returned to Washington. That was my vacation in the 18 months I had spent with Phil Habib. Certainly, it was a memorable one.

Habib continued in office then, attending a Chiefs of Mission conference in Honolulu. About April, 1976, he left EA. Bill Gleysteen took over as Acting Assistant Secretary for about one month. Art Hummel had been assigned to Ethiopia as Ambassador. Secretary Kissinger decided that he wanted him back as Assistant Secretary for East Asian Affairs. So Hummel came back from Ethiopia and became officially Assistant Secretary for East Asian Affairs for the first time, following several periods as Acting Assistant Secretary.

Hummel asked me to stay on as his Special Assistant. However, by this time I was approaching three years in this job and I really needed to do something else. Phil Habib agreed and suggested that I replace George Roberts as Country Director for Thailand and Burma. This job was scheduled to become vacant in September, 1976. I told Hummel, "Well, I have this job as Country Director coming up and I really should take that. But I'll be here for a few more months." So I served Hummel for a couple of months and then went on as Country Director for Thailand and Burma, in September, 1976.

One other matter that I should mention which was going on in the East Asian Bureau was the opening to China. This effort was led by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, of course. It started under President Nixon and continued under President Ford. The key players in this effort were Phil Habib, when he was Assistant Secretary of State for EA; Art Hummel, while he was the senior Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for EA and later when he became Assistant Secretary for EA; Dick Solomon, who was on the National

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Security Council staff; and Winston Lord, who was the Director of Policy Planning in the Department of State. These were all people who were quite knowledgeable about China, with the exception of Phil Habib, who was not a China expert. They were assisted by Oscar Armstrong, who was Country Director for the People's Republic of China, and subsequently by Harry Thayer, who succeeded Oscar Armstrong as Country Director for the PRC.

All of their dealings on this subject were extremely closely held. During the three years that I spent in the East Asian Bureau this was the only subject to which I didn't have much access or knowledge about what was going on. This was all right. I understood that. It was a very, very delicate matter. I had nothing to contribute in the way of expertise. This subject frequently involved very frenetic activity—all behind closed doors or late in the evening. However, it was important activity and, of course, had long term significance.

Q: I transcribed an interview for this oral history, in which Art Hummel has described the sequence of events, beginning in Pakistan, when he was Ambassador there. When he was in Pakistan, Art was diverted into a holding pattern in Pakistan to get him out of the way Secretary Kissinger and the rest of his party went off to China. It was well done, and Art Hummel goes into this in some detail.

HELBLE: I didn't realize that Art was so deeply involved that early. Did you just transcribe the interview or did you do it?

Q: No, I transcribed it. I read it very thoroughly, which is one thing that you do with these transcripts. You really get to know them, because you record every word.

HELBLE: That must have been an interesting interview. I have a lot of respect for Art Hummel.

Q: Yes, he's a very impressive guy. Do you have any final feelings about Vietnam? Did you feel at any time that our effort to help the Republic of Vietnam to defend itself against

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communist aggression was ever a manageable, workable project or did you feel that this was doomed to failure?

HELBLE: No, I continued to believe that success was achievable until the last four or five months before the end in 1975. There was a period in the early 1970's, when I learned from Vietnamese friends of mine, whom I always looked up during various trips to Saigon and Hue, that the situation was much better and that there was greater freedom of movement in the countryside. The number of incidents in most areas had declined. The Vietnamese Army seemed to be doing a good job. There was considerable optimism at this time, which I had never heard expressed previously, by people whom I regarded as very reliable sources.

Q: I think that they were quite correct, and the reason was this. After the great Tet offensive of 1968 the communist side had used up its reserves of Viet Cong, properly speaking. In fact, they were finished. The North Vietnamese regulars who were used in the Tet offensive had suffered so heavily that areas which had had extensive communist influence suddenly became free of communist activity. It was possible to rebuild roads and bridges which had been destroyed. I believe that, generally speaking, there was a feeling of considerable optimism. I was in Saigon at the Embassy at this time and I remember it very well.

HELBLE: One officer from the Vietnam desk who had lengthy Vietnam experience and who was a Vietnamese speaker, Jim Bullington, made a trip to Saigon in the fall of 1974 and traveled around the country. When he came back, he reported that conditions, in fact, were extremely worrisome with respect to ARVN's capabilities. They were uncertain that they would be resupplied by the U. S., which was cutting its aid—and military aid in particular. They were concerned that the U. S. would not be sending more supplies, and they therefore began to cut down on their consumption of supplies. For example, Jim said that ARVN troops on guard duty were issued just one hand grenade instead of several. They were issued limited amounts of ammunition. Jim said that the situation was very

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worrisome. It was difficult for us to believe that, at first. However, Phil Habib took note of the fact that these were the views of a reliable, reporting officer. It was the first such indication that we had received. We were not receiving that sort of information through Ambassador Graham Martin's reporting.

Q: This was a consequence of his restrictions on reporting.

HELBLE: Right. In any event, that was what really led Phil Habib ultimately to persuade the administration to make an effort to get Congress to provide a supplemental appropriation of money for Vietnam, which we've already discussed. Jim Bullington's account was the first thing that I had heard in some years so troubling.

Q: There's a very good study of this period after the signature of the Paris Agreement of 1973 called, Vietnam from Cease-Fire to Capitulation (U. S. Army Center of Military History, Washington, 1981, published by the Government Printing Office) by Colonel Bill Le Gro, who was assigned to the Office of the Defense Attach# in Saigon between 1973 and the end in 1975. I had known him when he was on the faculty at the Army War College in 1970-71, when I was a student there. Have you seen this study?

HELBLE: No, but I know Colonel Le Gro.

Q: He went into this whole question of supplies during this whole period in detail. He sets out what was actually delivered and the impact on ARVN morale. He concluded that, on the whole, we replaced about 20 percent of the military supplies, including ammunition, which ARVN expended between 1973 and the end in 1975. This is precisely what you've been talking about.

HELBLE: I think that probably answers your question. As I indicated previously, I left the Special Assistant's job after three years and moved on to a line job as Country Director for Thailand and Burma. This was just about the kind of operation I wanted at that point, because it gave me a different kind of experience and different countries than I'd had

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experience in before. It would be something less of a pressure cooker, and I liked both the Thai and the Burmese with whom I had had contact over the years. I liked both countries and felt that it would be a pleasant and essentially non-crisis area of assignment, although there was this strong undercurrent of concern, particularly in Thailand, about its future, in the wake of the Indochina disaster.

From a policy point of view I had to deal with the withdrawal of U. S. military forces and facilities from Thailand. I made a trip of one month or so after I took charge of the Thailand-Burma desk. The Country Directorate for Thailand and Burma was a relatively small office, with several officers and two secretaries. I remember meeting you in Bangkok.

Q: I was Political Counselor in Bangkok.

HELBLE: I made a trip up to Chiang Mai.

Q: When Dave Sciacchitano, a Political Officer in the Embassy, never turned up to accompany you.

HELBLE: With the mysterious Mr. Sciacchitano as my escort. Then you loaned me another officer from your staff, Linda...

Q: Stillman.

HELBLE: To accompany me to Burma because the Political Section in Bangkok always had an interest in what was going on in Burma.

Q: Linda had served at the Consulate in Chiang Mai and was very familiar with issues and personalities involved in the opium and narcotics traffic in Burma.

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HELBLE: So she and I went off to Rangoon and up to Mandalay, where I came down with a very devastating malady for 36 hours. It simply flattened me. I couldn't get much done in Mandalay.

Q: There wasn't much to do there, anyway. However, there are some very impressive Buddhist temples and shrines in the area.

HELBLE: I also made a stop in Malaysia, because I hadn't been there for a couple of years—or a year, anyway. I had lots of friends there.

Aside from that trip the daily grind on the Thailand-Burma desk, we had the Golden Triangle heroin problem, which affected both Thailand and Burma. Heroin originated primarily in Burma and moved into Thailand for worldwide distribution.

Q: Probably the bulk of the opium and heroin was produced in Burma, and to some extent in Laos.

HELBLE: That's right. Three countries were involved, but most of the drugs flowed through Thailand. Of course, we had a major effort going on, trying to stem that flow. Some things never change. Now, 20 years later, we can say the same things.

The Burmese internal political scene was interesting, but we had minimal interest or involvement in Burma, with the exception of the narcotics traffic.

In Thailand we had relatively greater interest but less interest than we had had a couple of years previously. In Thailand we were also interested in paring down our military presence. We didn't have many crises, by and large. I had the opportunity to talk on the phone to Ambassador Charley Whitehouse from time to time, because the Country Director, in many respects, is the Washington backup for the Ambassador. My job, in large measure, was to support the Embassy, deal with the Washington end of its problems, and fight for it when necessary with the Washington bureaucracy, as the situation dictated.

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I also talked frequently with John Burke, the DCM at the Embassy, an old friend. He had been an instructor at the University of Wisconsin in 1954-55, teaching my class in "The History of American Foreign Policy." Then he joined the Foreign Service in 1956. This was the first time that our respective careers had touched.

I can't say that anything of great moment or unusual in a policy sense happened at that time in Thailand. There were political developments going on. I didn't have or seek to have any particular influence on what was happening in that, other than to ensure the U.S. did not become enmeshed in Thai politics.

During my Thai-Burma stint, the transition from the administration of President Ford to that of President Carter occurred. During the transition between the election of November, 1976, and President Carter's inauguration Dick Holbrooke, whom we spoke of previously, was the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia-Designate. He was assigned to the Carter transition staff in the Department of State.

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Holbrooke sought me out to discuss East Asian matters. I had seen him a number of times in the East Asian Bureau front office between March, 1976, until I left the Special Assistant job in September, 1976. During this time, and on a number of occasions, he and Tony Lake discussed with Phil Habib which job they should take in the State Department when Carter was elected. Of course, when they started that process, it was almost eight months before Carter's election. So Habib and Helble, at least, thought that this was a very arrogant display, already lining up their jobs in the new Carter administration which has not yet been elected. Well, for whatever reason Carter did win the election. Immediately, Holbrooke became involved in liaison with the East Asian Bureau in the State Department.

He talked only to two people in the Bureau during this entire period of eight months. I was one of them. I suppose that he remembered me from a long time back. On a

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couple of occasions we talked about various aspects of the Bureau. Referring to my last encounter with him prior to this time frame in 1976, he said, "John, you really did me a favor in that counseling session." I thought that that was rather magnanimous and an unexpected source of praise on the subject, given the way that we had parted at the end of that interview. He said, "I'd really like to give you a very senior job when I take over as Assistant Secretary of State in January 1977." He mentioned the specific job. I told Dick that my pattern was to operate within the system. I had just taken over the Thai-Burma desk. I was content with it, but if he really needed somebody for that job, I would give some thought to any appropriate person. Dick was very puzzled by this, because it certainly was not the way HE operated in life. He couldn't understand why some guy who had stayed within the normal, bureaucratic channels would react negatively when an opportunity came out of nowhere to obtain a higher position.

Q: Did he ever tell you what the job was?

HELBLE: Yes, he did. It was an ambassadorship. However, I was not equipped to handle it, in my judgment. Furthermore, I didn't like being beholden to Holbrooke. I felt that I was at the proper level and in the proper job. I wanted to stay in the system.

In any event Holbrooke came in as Assistant Secretary, and in short order we were having problems. Not just me but almost all of the Country Directors in the bureau. Holbrooke started off with a flurry of activity, making policy decisions and trying to arrange things, in 98 percent of the cases, without reference to the bureau's experts and the bureau's country directorates. He should have tried out these ideas on the staff to have some feed-back for his own protection. In short order I know for a fact that, out of the 14 Office Directors, 13 of them were extremely unhappy, myself included. They were disgusted that things were being done without any discussion or reference to them and without their knowledge or utilizing the expertise available. This was just his mode of operation.

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For example, I had a particularly bad experience, but I was not alone in this respect. My Burma Desk Officer, who was also my Narcotics Officer, was ordered up to the front office and told by Holbrooke that he was to participate in a narcotics group in the White House, chaired by Dr. Peter Bourne, who had been assigned by President Carter as his drug czar Coordinator of Narcotics Policy. This was a highly restricted, interagency group. Our officer would participate in this group but he was NOT to discuss this with anybody else, including me.

So off to the White House my officer went. He came back from the first meeting and reported to me exactly what had happened, swearing me to secrecy, of course, for his own protection. I understood that and appreciated his loyalty. Then he went to several, subsequent meetings. At one point he learned that Holbrooke had been talking to CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] about providing some military type aircraft to the Burmese Government for them to use to track the heroin transit trails in northern Burma. The purpose was to interrupt such traffic.

My Burma Desk Officer was Richard M. Gibson. He was, of course, horrified by this proposal. I was outraged by it. Anybody who knew anything about the situation knew, first of all, that we were not doing much of anything with the Burmese Government in Rangoon, as it was then known. It was not exactly an ideal, humanitarian, human rights-oriented type government, and the animosities and hostilities between the ethnic Burmans who dominated the Burmese Government and certain of the tribal groups which ringed Central Burma, including the Karens, Kachins, and others, were long enduring. There was constant warfare between them, at varying levels. Many of these tribal groupings had significant elements which supported friendship with the United States, including U.S. Christian missionaries who had worked in those areas for generations. They felt that the Burmans, and the Burmese Government, were very oppressive toward these tribal groups.

And now Holbrooke proposed to provide the Burmese Government with aircraft. There was no question in my mind that the Burmese Air Force, to the extent that it functioned

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at all and was able to maintain such aircraft and keep them flyable, would use them, first and foremost, in their own list of priorities, against rebel Karens, Kachins, and others. Secondly, just to satisfy us and for whatever other reason there might be, they would use them against narcotics traffickers in northern Burma. In any event, I was sure that these aircraft would be misused, from time to time if not regularly.

Well, Holbrooke had never consulted anybody in the EA Bureau on this subject. I haven't the foggiest idea whom he consulted. Bob Oakley, then Deputy Assistant Secretary of State covering Southeast Asian Affairs, was my immediate supervisor at that point. I left a message for him one evening that I wanted to talk to him when he was available. Well, he came down to my office, and for an hour I expressed my outrage about this issue, the incident at hand, the general management of the Bureau, and the extent of unhappiness in it. I had been in the Bureau for three years and knew all of the people in it. I could speak with some authority about the prevailing views. I really unloaded on Oakley. He seemed rather shocked, but he's usually a very laid back fellow and took it all calmly. I said, "What you do with this information is up to you, but somebody up there on the Sixth Floor in the front office of this Bureau ought to be aware of it. This is too much, and I'm not going to put up with this type of behavior by Dick Holbrooke, which affects this office and our Embassies in Bangkok and Rangoon. I have no idea what their views are, but I could bet what the views would be in the Embassy in Thailand, if they were aware of this matter of providing military aircraft to the Burmese."

In any event it wasn't long after that that I decided that I had had enough. A senior officer in the Department had approached me some months before and asked me if I would be interested in going to Cairo to administer a \$200 million AID housing project. I said, "I don't know anything about contracting or housing. I live in a house, but what else?" I said, "Thank you very much, but no thanks."

I had this discussion with Bob Oakley one evening during the first week of April, 1977. We had only had two and one-half months or so under Mr. Holbrooke's guidance at that point,

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but I thought, "I can't operate under these conditions and I won't do so." So I called this senior officer who had offered me the Cairo job on a Wednesday and said, "Is that job in Cairo still open?" He said, "I haven't filled it yet." I said, "I'll take it." He said, "Great." I said, "Mind you, you're not getting anybody who has any background in this, but I'll do it." So he said, "All right. Great. I'll call you tomorrow."

The next day he called and said, "John, you can have that job. No problem about that." However, he said, "The Inspector General is looking urgently for somebody as an Inspector." He said, "In fairness to you, I want to mention this opportunity to you. I have no doubt that you would be acceptable for the job, if you want it. So tell me what you want to do." I said, "Well, give me a chance to think about it. I'll call you tomorrow." So I went home and discussed the matter with my family and presented the two options. They did not favor either one, really. However, their complaint about the job with the Inspector General was that, during the recent jobs that I had had, I had been away from home a great deal and hadn't had much family life. They said, "Now, if you go into the Inspection Corps, you're going to be three months overseas and three months back here for a couple of years."

Nevertheless, I went back the next morning, called my friend, and said, "Well, I'll take the job with the Inspector General." So I went off to be an Inspector. I had called him on a Friday morning to say that I would take the job. Late on Friday afternoon he called and said, "You were paneled (assigned) today, and you are to report to the Office of the Inspector General on Monday morning." He said, "By the way, Holbrooke knows about this, doesn't he?" I said, "He doesn't know anything about it, but you don't know anything about that, either." [Laughter] So between Wednesday and Friday afternoon I had arranged a transfer.

Bill Gleysteen was still in the EA front office. He was the senior Deputy Assistant Secretary. I went up to see Bill at about 6:30 PM, having packed up my personal belongings in my office. I said, "Bill, here's the situation. I'm reporting to the Inspector General's office on Monday morning. I've 'had it' with the way this operation is going. I

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won't be a part of it any more. I have no respect for the leadership here. This doesn't include you—you know that. However, I'm not going to go in and tell Holbrooke.” He had left for the afternoon, anyway. I said, “I'll just leave it to you to pass on the word that we need a new Country Director for Thailand and Burma Monday morning.” That was the last I saw of Mr. Holbrooke or of service directly in the East Asian Bureau. I just walked out, and on the following Monday morning I was in the Office of the Inspector General.

Q: Then we can take up this next phase of your career in the Office of the Inspector General, with new challenges and interests. Thank you.

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Q: Well, John, we'll start this section of the interview with your experience in the Office of the Inspector General. So take it away from here.

HELBLE: As instructed, I reported to the Inspector General's office on the following Monday morning. It was early in April, 1977. I was advised that, along with an auditor, I would be assigned to a very short inspection of the Freedom of Information Office of the Department of State. At that time this function was under the Bureau of Public Affairs. This would be a two-week inspection. The mission was specifically to determine whether the Bureau of Public Affairs was justified in pressing for two additional positions, an officer and a secretary, to work in this office.

At that time the Freedom of Information functions which had been imposed on the Department of State by the Freedom of Information Act were relatively new. The work involved in the actual review process of documents requested by the public was being done by the respective geographic and functional bureaus, regarding materials pertaining to them. The purpose of the inspection was to determine whether that centralized, small office, which consisted of only five people, should have an additional two people assigned

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to it. It appeared that this office was always way behind in processing requests for documents which had to be assigned to the bureaus for review.

There is really only one point to be made in terms of that brief inspection. It has nothing to do with whether we found that the request for two additional positions was essential or not. Rather, totally by accident, as I reviewed the way the whole process was operating in the State Department, I found that there was only one bureau in the entire Department which was able to keep abreast of Freedom of Information, or FOIA [Freedom of Information Act], requirements imposed on them. That was the Bureau of European Affairs. I learned that the reason that that bureau was able to keep abreast of its workload, in the midst of busy, daily, functional and operational requirements, was that the Bureau of European Affairs had hired a retired Foreign Service Officer to work in its own Office of Public Affairs. He was doing the actual review work. That was his sole responsibility. He was an intermittent employee and was able to handle the review process for the Bureau of European Affairs, without the Bureau's falling behind in its responsibilities. All of the other bureaus, in varying degrees, were way behind. Of course, their desk officers were trying to handle daily, operational things, which always took precedence in the mind of the Bureau, and understandably so.

When I wrote my report on the outcome of this brief inspection for the Inspector General, I pointed out that, while this was not a part of my assignment, I had observed things that I thought it would be prudent for the Department to consider. That is, centralizing the function of review and utilizing retired, Foreign Service Officers to perform this function. After all, these people had a wealth of background, knowledge, and understanding of the sensitivities of foreign affairs and the concerns which the various bureaus would have.

In the following year [1978] the Inspection Corps conducted a full-scale inspection of the FOIA processing system. This was triggered, in part, by my suggestion and much more by the reality that the Department was falling terribly far behind in meeting the statutory requirements imposed by the law. The Department was unable to keep up with the rapidly

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increasing flow of FOI requests. The conclusion of that full-scale inspection, performed by four Inspectors and which took several months, was, curiously enough, identical with the suggestion I had made. There was one modification which had to be negotiated. That was, that the bureaus would have, in effect, a veto right on anybody hired to perform this review function. That is, anybody hired to deal with East Asian documents would have to receive the endorsement of the Bureau of East Asian Affairs before the new, centralized office could hire him or her.

That system was implemented in 1979 and remains essentially in the same form in 1996, as we speak. That was probably the only significant input I had in the inspection system of the Department of State over the next two years. I certainly worked very hard over the next two years, although not with the same degree of intensity as in most previous assignments. I did not put in as long hours as I had become accustomed to in the East Asian Bureau. I went to many different countries and found this a fascinating experience. However, I probably had a more lasting impact by that one, casual observation in a two-week inspection than I had in the next two years as an Inspector. However, I will talk a little bit about the next two years [1977-1979], because the Inspection Corps did a number of things for me and my development as an officer. It was certainly a very interesting experience in many respects. It took me to many corners of the world to which I would probably never have gone, had I not had that particular assignment.

My first, full-fledged inspection assignment was to a team slated to inspect our posts in Central America. This involved Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and the not yet independent British colony of Belize. This country was in the process of moving toward independence at the time of the inspection. We had a small Consulate General in the city of Belize.

I won't go into the observations we made in each country, because this would take us another three days to get through all of these countries. For me each of those Central American countries was a first-time exposure. I enjoyed it from the cultural point of view

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and the opportunities for some sightseeing on weekends to volcanoes, Indian villages in Guatemala, etc. This certainly acquainted me with an area of the world which I had not previously had the opportunity to visit. The senior Inspector was Herb Propps. Most of the inspection team consisted of two substantive officers, one of whom would be the senior inspector, the second of whom would be his deputy, plus an administrative inspector and an audit-qualified inspector. Thus, most teams consisted of four officers, although the size of the teams was configured according to the needs of the inspection.

So four inspectors went off on that trip, after approximately six weeks of preparation in the Department of State, interviewing people on the Central American desk and in the Bureau of American Republics Affairs (ARA). We also talked to representatives of other Washington agencies who had interests in those countries, such as the Peace Corps, the U. S. military, the National Security Council, and so forth. After the six weeks of preparation we visited each of the countries, spending about five to twelve days in each. The entire trip took two months.

Herb Propps was an experienced, Senior Inspector. He was a very solid fellow, rather academic in his demeanor and very cautious. However, he was willing to take on a fight if necessary. As a senior inspector it was important to have that arrow in your quiver because there would be situations from time to time that would call for that. We encountered one such situation during the Central American trip. The senior Inspector has to be tough to stand up to the Ambassador and to level a blast and stick by that blast if the circumstances require it. Herb was a very good teacher, and I certainly benefitted from having that first exposure to an inspection under his guidance.

Several of the senior inspectors whom I traveled with later on were not as beneficial to my development. They were not up to quite the same standards that I thought were appropriate.

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The only incident during the Central American trip, to which I vaguely alluded, involved the Ambassador in Nicaragua who was a political appointee. He had arrived at his post only a couple of weeks before President Carter took office. He had been nominated and approved by the Senate prior to Carter's election but, for one reason or another, did not take up his post until early January, 1977. From the time of his arrival at post he had spent virtually the entire personnel resources of that Embassy in trying to persuade the new administration that, despite the fact that he was a Republican—and very much of a Republican—he deserved to be kept in place by the new Carter administration. This, of course, was a forlorn hope on his part, but he generated wads of publicity, took up thousands of hours of staff time, not only generating this publicity in Nicaragua, but making copies of every press item that he could get placed in the newspapers or photos of him with one person or another in the country. A look at the Embassy's long distance telephone bills showed that he had spent hundreds of hours on the phone to various Congressional and other offices in Washington. According to his Deputy Chief of Mission, his secretary, and others, these calls were totally devoted to trying to gain support in Washington for his continuation as Ambassador. He was running a very shabby operation. He had lost the respect of much of the Embassy staff in the brief time that he had been there.

When we returned to Washington, we informed the appropriate authorities in the Department that it was our conviction that he should be removed and that he was not doing the Department or the Embassy a service by continuing there, regardless of what political support he might be able to develop.

Q: Was he a businessman?

HELBLE: He was a businessman. He just lusted after this particular title and the glory that he thought came with this. Lord only knows what his motivations were, but it was a very foolish exercise. It was sad to see this from the point of view of the Embassy. That's really the only noteworthy thing that I observed, besides the day in, day out processes of seeing

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how an inspection should be run. That inspection took place during the late spring-summer of 1977.

In the fall of 1977 I was assigned to a smaller, three-man team of inspectors, with Ambassador David Osborn as senior Inspector. He had been Ambassador to Burma when I was Country Director for Thailand and Burma, so I knew him quite well. He was on his first tour as senior Inspector. The three of us inspectors visited what was known as The Southern Caribbean. This included Martinique, Barbados, Trinidad & Tobago, Curacao, Suriname, and Guyana. Ambassador John Burke was serving in Guyana. He had left the position of DCM under Ambassador Charley Whitehouse in Bangkok and had been in Guyana about six weeks when we arrived there. Guyana was a miserable place in most respects, in terms of living conditions, climate, and so on. Potentially, it was a site for a morale disaster. However, we found, and I thought that this was particularly interesting, that morale in that Mission was very high. Although Ambassador Burke had only been there for six weeks, we had to attribute this circumstance, in some measure, to him. I think that that was the case, because it was clear that Ambassador Burke was very attentive to his staff and very aware of the difficulties imposed on them in their day to day lives. Really, he made sure that they knew that he was looking after them. He was concerned about any small problem that came up involving them. That was instrumental in terms of the morale situation.

However, there was another factor which I appreciated by the time I finished my two years in the Inspection Corps. That was, based a little bit on my own experience, but certainly more on what I had observed in those two years, that, frequently, a real hardship post engenders more of a sense of community based on shared suffering and mutual support. If you have reasonably good and attentive leadership in the person of the Ambassador or the Principal Officer at the post, you develop relationships, confidence, and associations that are enduring, and you do not have the morale problems that I saw in other posts. Examples of the latter were Brussels and The Hague, posts which, you might think, are marvelous, Western European cities in an interesting part of Europe. People might think

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that they are going to a very civilized place with all sorts of amenities, travel, good food, and so forth. However, in places like Brussels and The Hague we found, in subsequent inspections, extremely low morale, a high level of grievances, a high level of unhappiness with the leadership of the Embassy, and a lack of attentiveness to real problems for those people in such a situation, even though it wasn't a matter of obtaining a variety of good food or having available opportunities for entertainment or travel.

The problems that arose were different because, in many cases, medium level officers and more junior personnel in Missions such as The Hague and Brussels could not afford to indulge in the types of activities available. They did not have the time, the exchange rate for the dollar in terms of the European currencies was very bad, salaries didn't stretch as far as they should, and cost of living allowances were adjusted only very slowly by the Department and rarely caught up with the realities of the exchange rate. Housing in such places was generally poor in quality, compared to that in many of these isolated, genuinely hardship posts. It was recognized by the Department, at least in this sense, that good housing was essential in those hardship posts. The Department's assumption was that housing wasn't so important in a fine, Western European city. This meant that people in Brussels or The Hague were frequently jammed into small apartments, often didn't have laundry facilities in the apartment and had to make outside arrangements, and so forth. All of these things depressed morale.

Going back to Guyana, I would say that morale was good. It was a combination of conditions which drive people together, with good leadership by the Ambassador. In such a situation people can look at each other and say, "We're all suffering."

While I'm discussing Guyana, I might mention that while we were there we were informed that there was a small, American community of about 900 people, living in the jungle up country. This was some sort of religious sect. Most of them were Americans, though a few were not Americans. It had already created problems for the Embassy with the Guyanese

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Government. These people operated very much as a communal sect. There were a lot of strange stories circulating about what these people did up in their jungle camp, and so on.

During that particular inspection I inspected - inter alia - the consular function in the Embassy. The problems associated with this sect certainly fell into the field of consular affairs, although it had political implications for the Ambassador in terms of relations with the host Government. In my inspection report on consular affairs I included a couple of paragraphs about this group and about the need for the very careful attention which, I thought, was being given to it. However, I did this in an effort to encourage the Embassy to continue what it was doing and to be very careful about the public relations problems generated by the group. The group had significant political ties to California, which was the area that most of the group came from. I thought that it would be very important to handle press and media relations delicately and to continue to monitor the situation closely, as well as the welfare and whereabouts aspects of the consular function.

A year later [1978], to jump ahead, I had just come back from an inspection in Hong Kong and China. I was assigned responsibility for writing the final inspection report. The Inspector General called me in. I had just learned the previous night on the TV news of the tragic, Jonestown disaster in Guyana. Congressman Leo Ryan, who was part of that political connection to California, had arrived at the camp of this sect, known as Jonestown in honor of Jim Jones, the sect leader. For some reason—I don't think that we ever really understood it—the camp guards became involved in a shoot out at the airstrip near the camp. Congressman Ryan was shot and killed. The DCM at the Embassy, who was accompanying him, was wounded, and several other people were killed at the airstrip. That was followed by a mass suicide in the camp among the adherents of this sect. In most, if not all cases, everybody drank deliberately poisoned Kool Aid which killed them. More than 900 people, almost all Americans, died on this occasion.

This, of course, was newsworthy in the United States, I might say. As I said, on the night before the Inspector General called me in to talk about this subject, the news broke on the

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TV evening news. I instantly thought of my good friend, John Burke, and what a mess he was in, as Ambassador. The full dimensions of what had happened up there in the camp were far from known at that point, but the fact that Congressman Leo Ryan had been killed made this big news, in and of itself—never mind the small matter of 900 people committing mass suicide.

The Inspector General, Ambassador Bob Sayer, said to me, “Helble, you were on that inspection trip to Guyana last year. Did we address this issue of the people up there?” I said, “Yes, we certainly did, Bob. It's in my consular report.” Nobody could have foreseen what happened there, but at least this inspection report showed that we were aware of the existence of a problem and that we had recommended that the Embassy should be extremely careful in its handling of this situation. I said, “From your point of view, I think that you're 'clean.'” I added, “What the situation is with poor Ambassador John Burke, I don't know.”

Q: I think that it finished off John's career as an Ambassador. It was very unfair.

HELBLE: Well, it did. Another week went by. I was called in again by the Inspector General.

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The Inspector General said that this incident had the Department in a real bind. There had been howls of anguish and anger from the Congress. There were all kinds of messages bouncing back and forth between the Embassy in Georgetown, Guyana, and the Department. He said that there were a lot of things going on. It had been decided by the Seventh Floor of the Department, where the Secretary of State and the most senior officers had their offices, that we needed somebody as a sort of ombudsman to monitor all of this traffic and make sure that the Department was dealing fairly and squarely with the issue and handling things in the proper manner. The Inspector General said, “I want you to do that. I'm not relieving you from drafting the inspection report on China, which is still due

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on December 15.” It was now December 1. The Inspector General said, “You are to sit in the ARA Bureau and read every piece of paper that comes in or goes out on this matter.”

I thought, “Oh, boy, just what I need! I suppose I'm going to get the 'real dirt' on what they're saying about John Burke. They're probably saying that he must have made some mistake on this matter.” Well, that assignment lasted only for a week, but the issue became so hot that the Department decided that it needed two, highly professional, career Ambassadors to go to work on this job. One of them was already retired. So I was relieved of my duties as an ombudsman and returned to the preparation of the inspection report on China. The Jonestown Massacre took place a year after our 1977 inspection so that, in fact, the inspection of Guyana and the Southern Caribbean was not of any particular interest in the overall scheme of things—except that I brushed against the Jonestown affair and then, a year later, I found myself enmeshed in it, even if only momentarily.

Q: Who were the Ambassadors appointed to look into this?

HELBLER: Well, Stan Carpenter was one of them, but I cannot recall who the other Ambassador was. The inspection trip through the Southern Caribbean was not as satisfying an experience because of Ambassador Dave Osborn, the senior Inspector. He was all right, but he was not nearly as qualified as Herb Propps had been during the inspection trip to Central America. He didn't act in the proper way, in my judgment. There was nothing exceptional about those countries which we visited. All of those countries, with the exception of Trinidad & Tobago and Curacao, were countries which I had never visited before. This was new territory for me.

That inspection was followed by an inspection of the Benelux countries, Belgium, The Netherlands, and Luxembourg. I went to those countries in February-March, 1978, as a member of the inspection team. Except for the brief 1975 Habib trip to NATO, I had never set foot in Europe. I must say that the food was good—no question about that. Late winter, in February and March is not exactly an ideal time of year in the Lowlands. It's dark, cold,

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and wet. There's a lot of rain. I can see why people grumble about the weather, which no doubt contributed to some extent to that morale issue which I mentioned earlier about Brussels and The Hague.

In Luxembourg we found one awkward situation involving a political appointee Ambassador who was not married. He had a local employee social secretary who also functioned as his protocol officer. In the minds—and perhaps dirty minds—of some of the staff of the Embassy, she might have had a closer relationship with the Ambassador than was appropriate. Quite frankly, we found no meaningful evidence that would point to a problem in that respect, but there was a perception to this effect. That perception was enhanced by his custom, on occasion, to have this attractive young lady have breakfast with him in his bedroom in the morning, while they talked about the program for the day.

Q: People wondered what the business was.

HELBLE: Yes, there were questions about it, and perhaps there were other signs that contributed to this perception.

During that inspection I was traveling with Clay McManaway, who was the Senior Inspector. Clay McManaway was regarded by some people in the Department as an unguided missile. He had basically come out of the vortex of AID, but I've forgotten the exact details. I had had one previous encounter with him. Phil Habib bore the brunt of it. Phil and McManaway, together with Larry Eagleburger, who was Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs at the time, had a shouting match in my presence. I found McManaway very offensive and I knew that Habib did not like him. When I was preparing for this inspection trip, I was called in again by Ambassador Bob Sayre, the Inspector General, who said, "Helble, I'm sending you on this team with McManaway. I didn't want McManaway as a Senior Inspector. I was ordered to take him. I will take him for one trip only. He is an 'unguided missile.' I'm sending you along as his 'watchdog.' If anything starts to go wrong, you are to send me a message in the Inspector General Channel, alerting me

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as to what the problem is. Meanwhile, you should make every attempt to 'control' him. He will go on one inspection trip only, and this will be it.”

I thought, “Oh, boy, what a great assignment this is. Here I am, being sent to 'monitor' my boss and to 'snitch' on him behind his back if he doesn't do what I think is right.”

Well, I went off on this trip with McManaway with considerable trepidation. As the days went by, and the first inspection of Luxembourg continued, which only took about a week or so, the inspectors worked and socialized together. I came to see a different McManaway than I had observed previously or his reputation had earned him. In point of fact, he turned to me repeatedly for advice, and we discussed seriously every issue that came up. He worked seriously as a team member and team leader. He brought all of us into everything and talked everything out. He was not precipitous in his conclusions. He was thorough and, frankly, he did a first-rate job during the whole trip. We became good friends. After we completed the inspection of the Embassy in Brussels, our second stop, I felt completely relaxed about my mission from Bob Sayre. I later told Sayre that I didn't think that there was any reason for concern about McManaway, and this was true. McManaway just did a super good job as a Senior Inspector. Sayre, on the other hand, had made up his mind that McManaway would have one inspection trip only, and that was it. I don't know what happened to McManaway after that, but eventually he wound up as Ambassador to one of the Caribbean islands, though I don't recall which one. Actually, he also was the First Deputy Assistant Secretary in the Bureau of Administration in charge of the newly created (1979) centralized Freedom of Information Office to which I referred earlier.

When it came to the issue of dealing with the Ambassador in Luxembourg, McManaway was very tactful, very diplomatic, and very firm with that Ambassador about adjusting his manner of operation to relieve the prevailing perception about what he was doing with his Social Secretary/Protocol Officer. The Ambassador had some trouble in biting the bullet in this connection. However, McManaway handled this very well.

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We had no particular problems with the Embassy in Brussels or the Ambassador—nor did we in The Hague. Both of these were interesting inspections for various reasons, but there was nothing that warrants elaboration here. In Belgium we also inspected the Consulate General in Antwerp and, in the Netherlands, the Consulates General in Rotterdam and Amsterdam. That gave us some chance to see some things outside of the capitals.

The next inspection that I went on was Southern Africa, involving the South African Republic, Swaziland, Lesotho, Mozambique, and Botswana. This was again a totally new area for me. My Senior Inspector was Jim Wilson, formerly DCM in Manila, whom I knew a little bit from my service in East Asia. Jim was easy to get along with. He had been in the Inspection Corps as a Senior Inspector for some time by then. We had just one other member on that team, a nice fellow - Dick Fischer. In each post that we inspected there were post problems, but they weren't particularly serious, as far as we could perceive. There were issues that we could address, or try to address. There was a secretary who had a drinking problem, some other matter of smoothing out certain reporting procedures, and the identification of problems involving personal relationships to be addressed by senior management. Depending on the nature and severity of the problem, sometimes inspectors can do that in the course of the personal interview process.

I must say that the personal interview process surprised me from the time of my first inspection in Central America. I had assumed from the outset that there would be problems when you sit down, one on one, and you try to get an officer or a secretary—or even a local employee, and I interviewed many of the local employees—to talk candidly about problems that they were having in the office and the situation in the office. I thought that it would be very difficult for someone from the outside just to plunge in, coming armed with the reputation of being an inspector. I thought that you might intimidate some and offend others.

On the contrary, what I learned during the inspection trip through Central America was that I had to learn to curtail the interview. I was running out of time, with many more people

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to be interviewed in the inspection time remaining. I had to try to limit these interviews to one hour, because I found that some people would be happy to talk for two or three hours. It was very interesting. I had to ask very few questions. By the end of that interview process you had a pretty good idea whether there were any problems with their immediate boss or beyond that, whether there were serious problems which you could cross check in subsequent interviews involving the Ambassador or the DCM. So that phase of the inspection process really surprised me. I was relieved, because it clearly made our jobs easier. People wanted to talk about their jobs and positions. If you used a sincere approach with them and assured them that their remarks would be kept confidential, you could get most to talk freely.

The Southern Africa exposure was very interesting. South Africa is a magnificent country. At that time, of course, apartheid and the horrendous racial problems presented real difficulties. Much of the land resembles Arizona. Some mountainous areas resemble the U.S. Northwest. There is a lush, tropical environment elsewhere. We had a chance to visit Kruger National Park, a tremendous game reserve.

Each of the smaller countries was of interest. They were far less developed than the South African Republic. Mozambique was under a Marxist, socialist regime. It was a very difficult place to live, and people in our Embassy found it hard to operate in. Our Senior Inspector, Jim Wilson, came down with dengue fever in Botswana. He also got a finger jammed in the sliding panel door of a van, which gave him acute pain as we left the Ambassador's residence after the July 4 reception in Mozambique. We had to take him to the hospital for treatment. Apart from that, nothing very exciting happened during this inspection. It was, perhaps, the most interesting of the inspection trips I made, in terms of the countries involved, i.e., South Africa, Mozambique, Swaziland, Botswana and Lesotho.

The final overseas inspection trip I made was to Hong Kong and China. Four of us went to Hong Kong and spent five weeks there. Brewster Hemenway was the Senior Inspector and had been a classmate of mine at the Foreign Service Institute. Sheldon Kryss, who

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later became an Ambassador and then Assistant Secretary for Diplomatic Security and had a distinguished career, was the Administrative Inspector. Then there was an auditor, as well as myself. After five weeks in Hong Kong the auditor returned to the United States, and the three other inspectors went into China. Hong Kong was a city that I knew pretty well, because I had been there a number of times. I always enjoyed that beautiful city. I knew where a lot of small Chinese restaurants were. The inspection of Hong Kong brought out no extraordinary problems that I recall.

We went into China via rail to Kuangchou, or Canton, as it was previously known. We took a 36-hour train ride from Kuangchou north to Beijing. It was a great experience, seeing such a vast amount of Chinese territory, including rural areas which were not economically very impressive. The cities that we stopped in looked pretty shabby, but there was nothing that should surprise anybody. The train accommodations were adequate, but hardly luxurious. Prior to our arrival in Beijing, Sheldon Krys approached me and asked if I had observed anything strange about Brewster Hemenway, our Senior Inspector. Well, Krys and Hemenway had spent a lot of time with each other in Hong Kong. I had chosen not to join them during our free time. I had a friend in Hong Kong and went out to play golf with him a couple of times on the weekends. I did my own thing. I had watched this relationship between Hemenway and Krys. I was not comfortable with it but I wasn't going to do anything to try to alter it. I was content just to get through the trip. I was very wary when Krys approached me and asked if I had observed anything strange about Hemenway.

The truth of the matter is that I had observed a number of strange things about Hemenway before we left Washington, during the preparation phase of this inspection. I certainly felt that he acted rather strangely, and not always coherently in Hong Kong. So finally I said, "Yes, I think that our leader has some very serious problems." Krys said, "I've reached the same conclusion. He seems to be 'losing it' in terms of coherency, ability to concentrate, and so on." The more we talked about it as we approached Beijing, the more we realized that we had a situation something like that of "Captain Queeg," the principal character in the novel, *The Caine Mutiny*. In the novel the senior lieutenant had to take over control of

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the ship. Neither of us, of course, felt very comfortable with this situation. We didn't want to make a scene when we got to Beijing.

At this point we did not have an Embassy in Beijing. We had the United States Liaison Mission headed by Leonard Woodcock, the former President of the UAW—United Auto Workers. J. Stapleton Roy, whom I knew well from my front office days in the Bureau of East Asian Affairs, when he was on the People's Republic of China desk, was the DCM. So I agreed with Krys that I would talk to Stape Roy and explain to him that I thought that we had a fairly serious problem with Hemenway. Frankly, he was unable to conduct the inspection. We felt that we should go through the inspection and do the best we could, shelter Hemenway from having to do anything tough, but we needed the understanding of Stape Roy and Leonard Woodcock, his boss, in order to complete the inspection successfully. I planned to explain the entire circumstances to Bob Sayre, the Inspector General, when we returned to Washington.

We were able to do that. There was never any further discussion of this matter with Stape Roy or with Woodcock. We maintained the appearances of the situation. In point of fact Hemenway almost never met with us. Sheldon Krys and I just went about our business, occasionally mentioning to Hemenway how things were going. Hemenway seemed content with that and made no fuss about the situation. He didn't have to do anything. Essentially, we made sure that he didn't do anything. I was still very uneasy about this situation. When I got back to Washington, I had a full discussion with Bob Sayre, who also talked to Sheldon Krys about it. I said that this is what we concluded, this is why we concluded it, and this is what we did about it. I said, "I'll be honest with you. I think that Hemenway didn't have the foggiest idea of what to include in the final report. I'm confident that he is incapable of doing so at this point." So Sayre said, "You write the report." So that's where we were when we were talking about Guyana and jumped forward to when I was writing the report on the inspection of China and Hong Kong. It was another curious episode involving the situation where a boss loses it. We were in a pretty isolated position

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in terms of being some place where we could get help for him. I don't know whether we did the right thing or not, but it worked out all right.

Q: What happened to Hemenway after you got back?

HELBLE: I don't know. I never heard anything more about him. He eventually retired.

Q: He was one of the inspectors in Bangkok when I was assigned there.

HELBLE: Yes. He was.

Q: I don't want to laugh about it, but he had curious mannerisms. One of them in particular was that he wanted to get a rubber suit, something like a wet suit. He wanted to have it so arranged that it would zip down the back, and he could wear it when he was driving into the rain on his motorcycle. In those days it was kind of rare for a senior officer to come into the Department on a motorcycle. I think that it's still kind of rare, although maybe less rare than it used to be. This idea of getting a rubber suit in Bangkok to use when he was riding his motorcycle in Washington seemed to be his principal interest.

HELBLE: I did not know him well when we were junior officers, when we were in the same class at the Foreign Service Institute. He gave the appearance of being rather stuffy and a little arrogant, but he did have a sense of humor. I didn't know him well in the FSI context, and this was the first time that I had seen him since then. I rapidly concluded that there was something that was not tightly wired about this fellow. You might say that the elevator did not go to the top floor. Whatever his problem, it's too bad, but we did get through that inspection, without any adverse repercussions, either in terms of the Inspector General's responsibilities or the situation involving the Mission.

Q: John, when did you finish your assignment in the Office of the Inspector General?

HELBLE: During the last six months of my assignment there I indicated that I would like a Washington-based inspection. This covered the last six months, because I had been

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traveling for about a year and a half, off and on. The routine was usually two months or 10 weeks overseas, with a couple of months in between inspections. I had had enough traveling, and my family had had enough of my traveling.

I asked for a Washington inspection. Instead, Bob Brewster, who replaced Bob Sayre as the Inspector General in late December, 1978, or early January, 1979, took me on as his senior staff person. I was just as happy that this was going to be a Washington staff job, covering the full range of duties, rather than just inspection type activities.

Brewster and I got along very well for about 30 days. Then I began to perceive some very peculiar behavior on his part. [Laughter]

Q: I came into the Foreign Service with Brewster, and I know exactly what you mean! Listen, he was like this in 1949.

HELBLE: He drove me to the brink of absolute frustration as we were trying to lay out the inspection schedule for the coming year. It was not an easy process, and neither of us had gone through it before. However, I prepared a draft schedule. He went over it and then said, "Let's take this up at a staff meeting." Then we spent an afternoon going over this, with people haggling about this or that and whether we should have two inspectors here and four there, and so on. At the end of the meeting I couldn't tell where we were in terms of the original draft. Brewster said, "Helble, go and draft up another schedule." So I did. Two days later he convened the group again. This time he took the draft apart. Again, we spent several hours doing this. Then, at the end of it, he said, "Helble, do up another draft." Well, at this point we were under some time pressure. We had to get the schedule approved and inform various people in the Department. I was getting a little frustrated.

Soon I was on the fifth draft. Every time I would draft something and, during the meeting, Brewster would prefer to return to what I had had in an earlier draft. He would say, "Well, we should do that." We went back and forth, and I never saw so much spinning of wheels in my life. It drove me crazy —maybe literally. In any event, by the time that we were on

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the sixth draft, I had a young officer from Vietnam days, Don Colin on my staff. Don was a worker and a solid guy. He was willing to do anything, so I said, "Don, I'm not touching this subject again. You're my deputy. You're going to do the next draft. You're going to go to those meetings and you're going to handle this. I'm washing my hands of this. I've had enough."

So that was the beginning of what became a very difficult relationship with Brewster. Things turned sour very rapidly. I lost respect for him in any regard and I didn't want to have anything to do with him. My problem was that I had worked with some impressive people back in my days in the EA Bureau.

Q: Then when you had to deal with the problems of the real world, you found it hard to handle.

HELBLE: Yes. Mediocrity infected by an attitude of superiority I just could not take. I couldn't respect the man. The result was that for about three of the six months I was there under Brewster I didn't even talk to him. When it came time for me to leave, and I received my orders to go to Bangladesh, I didn't bother to go in and say goodbye to him. He didn't bother to write an evaluation report on me. I didn't bother to ask him for an evaluation report. I never got an evaluation report for that period and I didn't give a damn.

Q: Didn't anybody say anything about this?

HELBLE: No. I don't know why it was overlooked in the so-called foolproof checking system in Personnel. However, in any event, I was just as happy.

Q: John, how did your transfer to Bangladesh come about? Had you shown an interest in this or were you offered this assignment? Or did it come out of the blue?

HELBLE: I had never considered it and didn't know that there was a vacancy. I received a phone call from my DCM in Kuala Lumpur days, Irv Cheslaw, who was the head of Senior

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Assignments in Personnel at the time. He said, "John, the DCM job in Dacca, Bangladesh, is opening up. It's a senior assignment. You're an FSO-3 (in the old ranking system), one grade short of senior officer status. However, we customarily send the Ambassador a half dozen names. We try to work in one officer whose grade is one below the position."

Q: Is that what they call a stretch assignment?

HELBLER: Yes, that's what they call a stretch assignment. This is an option if the Ambassador wants to choose him. Irv asked, "Would you be agreeable to having your name submitted to the Ambassador?" I said, "Who's the Ambassador?" Irv said, "Dave Schneider." I said, "Well, I don't know him, and he doesn't know me. Let me talk to my family about it first, and I'll call you back tomorrow."

So I discussed this assignment with my family. This was all happening in the spring of 1979. Our son, Stuart, was in his last year of college and would be graduating that year, so he was not really a factor in terms of deciding whether I should take this assignment. The real issue was whether there was a proper school for our daughter, Ramona, to go to. She would be entering 9th grade the following fall. I had learned from the post report that, while there was a school, it was from kindergarten through 8th grade. There was nothing suitable at the high school level. People assigned to the Mission in Dacca with children of high school age usually did one of two things. They either kept them in the States, lodging them with friends or relatives for their high school years. Or they sent them to a private boarding school in India, Switzerland, or somewhere else. So we immediately identified this as the issue which we had to consider.

Mind you, I was not being offered the job. I was just being offered the opportunity to be on a list of six candidates for the post of DCM in Dacca. I didn't want to accept the offer of inclusion on the list, be selected, and then find out that, for family reasons, I couldn't accept it.

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Our daughter Ramona took her position right away. She said, "Dad, it sounds as if this would be a good job for you, if you are chosen. It's above your grade, and so on. Bangladesh and the Indian subcontinent would be a very interesting place to live. I would have an opportunity to see and do things that my peers here in Falls Church would probably never have a chance to see and do. As for schooling, is there a high school correspondence course that I could take?" Well, we knew that there was, through the University of Nebraska in Lincoln. We said, "Yes, but don't even think about a correspondence course. We tried this with Stuart in first grade in Hue, and it was a disaster."

Ramona said, "Well, I'm not my brother and I think that I could do it." We said, "Don't forget, you won't have any other American kids your age, you won't have a normal, social life, you'll probably have little, if any, formal instruction available. It's very difficult to keep up your work, day after day at the high school level through a correspondence course." She assured us, "No, I can do it. I will do it. Don't worry. I'd like for you to go and I'd be very happy to go. I don't want to stay here." We had two friends who had offered her a place to stay with them in Falls Church, VA, in the high school there. She said, "I don't want to stay in Falls Church and I don't want to go to boarding school. I'll take the high school correspondence course."

So I told Irv Cheslaw the next day that it would be OK for him to put my name down on the list for Ambassador Schneider to consider. The long and short of it was that, a few days later Ambassador Schneider made his selection. I was informed by Cheslaw that I had been selected as DCM in Dacca. I have no idea who the other five candidates were. Cheslaw had said, "I've really had problems in putting someone on this list who is less than a senior officer because I have too many 'unemployed' senior officers, as it is. However, we like to do this and to give the Ambassador an opportunity to choose." So, to my surprise I was chosen for the job. I didn't know Ambassador Schneider and had never worked in the subcontinent area or in that part of the Bureau of Near Eastern

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Affairs, which had been the Ambassador's home Bureau for many years. So I didn't have any established reputation there. I don't know, to this day, why he decided to select me—whether it was a blind choice because he didn't know anyone else on the list, whether he chose to take some young squirt, rather than someone more senior, or what.

Q: John, I know that you haven't had much opportunity to think about this and haven't prepared any notes on this, but this brings us about to the point where you were about ready to go to Bangladesh. Do you want to stop at this point or do you want to make any comments on anything else?

HELBLE: No, I think that this would be a good place to break off the interview. That leaves almost two and one-half years in Bangladesh to cover and then an assignment to Honolulu as CINCPAC POLAD Political Adviser to the Commander in Chief, Pacific. This would complete my account of my career, to all intents and purposes.

Q: Maybe, at the end of the process, you could go into briefly, but only briefly, into your buying this plot of land outside your windows in rural Virginia, planting it with Chardonnay grapes, and learning how to become a farmer and operate all kinds of equipment you had never used before. I think that it would be an interesting addition to this account.

HELBLE: We'll try to save the best for last!

Q: Okay, thanks very much, John.

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Q: Today is October 11, 1996. John, would you care to begin? I think that when we ended this interview previously, you were just finishing up your assignment to the Inspection Corps, and your assignment to Bangladesh as Deputy Chief of Mission had just come up.

HELBLE: The assignment to Bangladesh came about, in large measure, at my daughter Ramona's insistence. She said that if I were chosen for this job and if it was a good

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assignment for me, she was in favor of my accepting it. Even though she would not have a high school to go to in Bangladesh, she would be more than happy to spend her time doing a correspondence school course at the high school level, through the University of Nebraska. Her view was that she could learn things in Bangladesh that many of her contemporaries would never have an opportunity to learn and to experience. There were things in the Indian subcontinent that would be unique and a great opportunity for her to see and observe.

I might say, before I go into the actual assignment, that Ramona did, in fact, fulfill all of the objectives for two years of high school through the correspondence course. She made the honor roll and worked relentlessly—mostly alone, although occasionally with a tutor. She performed in a manner that I've always admired a great deal. We had, as I think I mentioned, a fairly “bad” experience with a correspondence course with our son Stuart at the first grade level when we were in Hue. However, I think that much depends on the individual child at the time that he or she meets these unusual challenges that arise in the Foreign Service. Ramona was very much “up to the challenge” at that point. I think that 9th and 10th grades in high school, which she went through via the correspondence course, are very difficult challenges to handle without classmates, working on your own. She was disciplined enough to achieve her educational objectives without the support systems normally available.

The assignment to the Embassy in Dhaka, Bangladesh, began on July 3, 1979, when we arrived in the country. This was the day before July 4 and the annual social function given by the Ambassador commemorating that occasion.

Q: Who was the Ambassador?

HELBLE: The Ambassador at the time was David T. Schneider. He was, and is, a first rate person, and an outstanding Foreign Service Officer. I had heard, prior to my arrival in Dhaka, that he was highly regarded as perhaps the most outstanding expert on the Indian

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subcontinent which the Foreign Service had at that time. Based on my two years of service with him in Dhaka, I have no reason to question that view of him. He was a gentleman, very "laid back," quiet, and soft-spoken and he earned everyone's respect. He was very fair to everyone. Working for him, as I did as his Deputy Chief of Mission, I benefitted from the loyalty and support which he gave me, as well as the encouragement and confidence he reposed in me throughout the time that I served under him. That was a great blessing.

Q: John, I've always heard it said that the DCM job is one of the worst in the Foreign Service. As DCM you have two problems, especially when you are Charg# d'Affaires. One problem is to look at a situation and decide what you should do about it. However, you also have to figure out what the Ambassador would have wanted to do if he were there. You don't want to do something that he would be strongly opposed to. Did you ever have a problem with this?

HELBLE: I never had much of a problem with that because, first of all, I was not Charg# for any long period of time. I was Charg# for a few weeks at a time at the most, I guess. I also knew that David Schneider was the kind of person who would not "second-guess" me and say, "Well, you should have done this or that." That was not his style. I never worried a great deal about that.

However, I think that you're absolutely right that that is a major problem for a lot of DCM's, particularly when they serve as Charg# d'Affaires. That is generally because of the Ambassador's personality.

At the reception on July 4, 1979, Ambassador Schneider introduced me to 500 or 600 of his "closest friends," of course. This was a great way to start off at the post, but it was a little overwhelming. As I said, Ambassador Schneider was very supportive and helpful. In fact, he always undertook to keep me very much involved in all of the activities in which he participated. He made contacts for me and was very supportive in connection with

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everything that I did. He told me at the outset that he would really like me to “manage” the Embassy.

About 80 Americans were assigned to our Embassy in Dhaka, about half of whom were employees of the U. S. Agency for International Development. They administered the aid program in Bangladesh, which amounted to more than \$100 million annually at that time. The Ambassador wanted me to look after the internal working of the Embassy, first and foremost.

There were a number of problems, particularly on the very large, administrative side. We had about 700 local employees in addition to the 80 Americans. Of course, virtually all of those local employees were Foreign Service Nationals in administrative support roles. So it was a big Mission. The reason for such a large Administrative Section was fairly obvious. Bangladesh was truly a Third World country, developing very slowly. The country had very little infrastructure with which to support Western life styles and institutions such as an Embassy. We had air conditioning and electrical problems all the time.

Q: What was the population of Bangladesh?

HELBLER: When I went there in 1979, Bangladesh had a population of about 88 million. Now, some 15 or 16 years later, the population is more than 120 million. You can tell that the rate of population growth is a major problem in a country like that. I should say that the 88 million people, or now, 120 plus million, are crammed into a territory the size of the State of Wisconsin, which probably has a population of five or six million. So that gives you some perspective.

Of course, Bangladesh had long ago been described by former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger as “the world's basket case.” This description, indeed, was somewhat unfair. I had been told before I went to Bangladesh that I would enjoy the Bengalis as people and that I would enjoy my tour there. That comment was made by people who had served there. People who had not served there were very sympathetic to me or very suspicious

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that I had really “screwed up” somehow to have been assigned to a place like Dhaka. However, the people who had served in Bangladesh knew what they were talking about. The Bengalis are very nice people. They are much “softer” in manner than the very “hard-edged” Indians that I had known in Kuala Lumpur or in Saigon. The Bengalis were generally well-disposed toward the United States, even though they carried some of the South Asian, subcontinent “baggage” of suspicion about American intentions. For example, it was widely believed in certain quarters in Bangladesh that the United States really wanted to establish a big, military base there to “counter” India. Some Bangladeshis would have favored that idea.

Of course, the United States had no such interest whatever in Bangladesh. United States' interests in Bangladesh were essentially humanitarian and included traditional, diplomatic contacts.

Q: Did we have much trade with Bangladesh, to speak of?

HELBLE: There was very little trade to speak of because the Bangladeshis had very little to sell. Basically, we bought jute from them for use in the manufacture of carpet backing or for related purposes. However, the flow of trade between the United States and Bangladesh was one-way, and it consisted mainly of aid, not trade.

Q: The West Pakistanis might not agree with this, but I've heard it said that West Pakistan was fortunate, in many ways, to have gotten rid of the incubus of East Pakistan. The population of East Pakistan was growing very rapidly, as you've said, and to an increasing extent, at least, the resources of West Pakistan were being devoted to support East Pakistan. Did you encounter any feeling of this kind?

HELBLE: Well, I don't think that the Bangladeshis, or the East Pakistanis, if you will, had any animus against West Pakistan of any substance. They, of course, shared West Pakistani “concerns”—and this is a mild word—about India. Both Pakistan and Bangladesh shared that concern and regarded India as their primary security threat. However, I don't

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think that there was any real animus as a result of the breakup of Pakistan in the early 1970's. There is a considerable amount of animus and fear among the Bangladeshis regarding the Indians, who are a very dominant political, economic, and military force on the subcontinent.

Q: The Bangladeshis are mainly Bengalis, is that right?

HELBLE: That is correct, and they are Muslims. There are some Hindus and some Christians in the country, but the dominant element, about 85 percent or more, are Muslims. That is, of course, a common feature that they share with Pakistan and with parts of India adjacent to Bangladesh. For instance, the people in the Province of Bengal and in the city of Calcutta in India are primarily Muslim. These are large Muslim enclaves in India.

I would like to emphasize that, really, the Bengalis were very enjoyable as people. I found them much easier to get to know and to deal with than I had found the Vietnamese. The Malaysians tended to be relaxed and easy to get to know, too. I was very pleasantly surprised at the way the Bengalis behaved. I came to like and really admire many of them. They were a very patient people, considering the circumstances of their material existence. They were not strongly of the fundamentalist Muslim element at that time—and still are not, as far as I know, although there are some strains of Islamic fundamentalism that do appear and did appear, even at the time that I served in Bangladesh in the late 1970's and the early 1980's.

Religion, of course, shapes so much of what goes on in the country. For example, Islamic law affecting land inheritance means that only the male heirs in a family receive any land. If a man owns one hectare of land, or two and one-half acres, which would not be an uncommon holding, and he has four sons, on his death the land is divided four ways among the four sons.

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Q: Does the man have any option? Does he have to make the division or can it be worked out by agreement?

HELBLER: Well, this is the Islamic law. It's not civil law, codified in the law of Bangladesh, but this is the Islamic tradition and practice. The result of this process is that the parcels of land many people own are tinier and tinier. Of course, we all recognize that this does not lead to efficient agricultural practices.

Q: There is a similar problem in Indonesia, which is also a largely Muslim country. The individual holdings of land have been driven down to very small parcels, and by now some two-thirds of the farmers are "farm workers." They own no land at all. Did this happen frequently in Bangladesh?

HELBLER: Yes, it was very common. Another aspect of Islamic law affected the population, which we have already referred to. It is expected that a young girl will be married by the time she is 13 years old. If she is not married by then, the dowry requirements are likely to escalate rapidly because there is a working assumption amongst would-be suitors or husbands that, after age 13, the girl is probably already "damaged goods."

Q: You mean, she is not a virgin. Is this a very important point?

HELBLER: The assumption is often that she is not a virgin, and it is a very important point. So by age 13 the girl is expected to be married. In most cases it will be an "arranged" marriage. On the average, in her lifetime she will give birth 13 times, eight of which will involve "live" births. On the average, there will be five "still births." Of the eight "live" births, four or five will be alive after one year. This tells you something about the conditions in the countryside as well as in the urban slums.

These conditions pose enormous problems and probably contributed to Henry Kissinger's description of Bangladesh as a "basket case." On the other hand the Bangladeshis were trying to do something about this. It wasn't easy because there isn't the necessary

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infrastructure or education. However, there was an enormous foreign aid effort undertaken both by governments and non-profit, private organizations which were trying to “target” some of these conditions. I think that they were making some progress, but the problems were so overwhelming that it will take much more progress regarding these problems than they have been able to achieve.

I might mention something else. The country, of course, is located on an alluvial plain, basically formed from the mountains of the Himalayas. Rainwater from these mountains, containing a considerable amount of soil, has come down the river systems to the Bay of Bengal in the Indian Ocean. Actually, the country expands to the south every year because of the alluvial deposits along the coast. The soil is very rich, of course, but there is no rock. The land is very flat, and during the Southwest monsoon season (May to October), almost the entire country is literally under water. When the rains fall and floods are created from the discharge of the many rivers, almost everything is covered, except perhaps for the roadbeds along which the railroad tracks run and some isolated villages which have been deliberately built up and are protected by dikes or berms.

Actually, the floods cut two ways. They can be devastating to crops but are actually essential for the rejuvenation of the soil and for productivity in subsequent years. So it's an interesting phenomenon. There is one area of the country along the Burmese border which is not really mountainous but where there are hills. That is the only relatively “high” area in the country.

Another example of what a country like Bangladesh has to put up with is that, as I said, it has no rock. Rocks are sometimes drawn from stream beds. They are mostly small and well polished, having been washed down from the Himalaya Mountains and deposited in the river beds. People dive into the water for these small rocks and use them for construction purposes. However, you can't get anywhere near enough rock that way. So the primary construction material, in lieu of rock, is brick. The Bangladeshis can make plenty of bricks. However, they break them up and mix them with cement to make concrete

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—or they use them for road beds. They don't break them up mechanically. They break up the bricks by hand. You will see workers along a road under construction, sitting on a pile of bricks—maybe under a black umbrella to shade them from the sun, if they can afford to buy one. They hold the bricks in their hands and break them up with a hammer.

The average Westerner would look at that and say, “Good Lord, why don't they get a rock crusher?” The answer to that is that one rock crusher would put about 500 people out of work who were breaking up bricks by hand. It is quite a sight when you first see it. You would probably never have seen such laborious effort made to build a road. However, that's the way it's done, under those circumstances in Bangladesh.

Obviously, the country is disaster-prone. It is well known that cyclones are likely to hit the country every couple of years. These storms kill anything from a few thousand to many thousands of people. That is almost a predictable event. Malnutrition and food shortages are endemic. Malnutrition is widespread. I would not say that “starvation,” per se, is widespread, but malnutrition is certainly widespread.

Q: You mentioned the production of burlap from hemp, the fiber that they grow there. Do they mainly produce rice, or what is the principal crop?

HELBLE: The principal food crop is rice.

Q: Does Bangladesh produce enough rice to feed itself?

HELBLE: No, nowhere near enough. There is a deficit in the rice supply, although a lot of the agricultural effort by foreign agencies has certainly improved the situation. However, Bangladesh is clearly a “food deficit” country, and I don't see any way that that will ever change.

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As I've said, though, the people are somehow hardy and exhibit remarkable energy under the circumstances. I think that they are a pretty admirable people, but they do have a "very tough row to hoe."

I've talked about the Embassy. Its functions were primarily to carry on humanitarian aid programs and to perform diplomatic, representational activity, like those of virtually every Embassy.

Q: How big was the Political Section, for example?

HELBLE: Well, we just had two Political Officers, plus one rotating, junior officer. The same arrangement applied to the Economic Section. There was a very large, Administrative Section. There was one Consular Officer, a "rotating" junior officer. There was a small United States Information Service detachment. There was an Office of the Military Attach#. Furthermore, 40 official Americans were assigned to the AID Mission. The rest of the people assigned to the Embassy were in the Administrative Section, including the General Services Officer, the Budget and Fiscal Officer, and so on.

Q: You referred to the Military Attach#. Was there much of a Bangladeshi military establishment?

HELBLE: The Bangladeshi military, in effect, were the political, "power center" of the country. That is not to say that there was much of a military establishment. It was a very impoverished Army and an even worse Air Force and Navy. They all had negligible assets, but the Bangladeshi Army was a cohesive unit most of the time. It was small but effective in determining who the political leaders would be, at the time I was there. This is no longer entirely the case. After the war between India and Pakistan in 1971, which resulted in the independence of Bangladesh, the Bangladeshi military establishment was very much in control of the country. Even though the President of Bangladesh was a civilian, he had

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been a military officer. When I was there, the President was Zia ul-Haq, a retired general. We'll discuss him at a later stage.

Our first, several months in Bangladesh during the summer of 1979 were devoted to getting to know the situation, settling down in our house, getting “hands on” experience with the levers of control at the Embassy, and so on.

One of the first problems that I had to deal with—and the Ambassador had alerted me to it early on—was a considerable level of unhappiness among the Foreign Service National employees of the Embassy. They had various grievances, if you will—real or perceived. Ambassador Schneider was anxious for me to try to address this situation. I decided to try to identify those Foreign Service National employees who were the “leaders” of this dissatisfaction, if indeed there were any such “leaders.”

I brought together about eight or 10 Foreign Service National employees, together with several key, American representatives from the Administrative Section. Over a period of time we developed a dialogue and addressed some of the sources of dissatisfaction, one by one. Some of these issues we could do something about and some of them we could do nothing about—at least in the foreseeable future. However, we talked about them. I encouraged the Foreign Service National employees to try to develop some form of organization which would encompass the bulk of the 700 or so Foreign Service National employees of the Embassy—so that there would be some channel of communication from the lowest levels up to the Embassy's front office, which I represented. Through these channels the Embassy's front office could communicate downwards to all elements of the Embassy staff.

Q: You were promoting a trade union.

HELBLE: That was certainly the view of several of my American colleagues, including the Administrative Counselor, who was very unhappy with this.

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Q: Who was he?

HELBLE: Grafton Jenkins. Grafton was not what one would regard as a particularly broad-minded individual. By and large, he did not relate well with the Bangladeshis in any situation. To be candid, he was “part of the problem.” However, I didn't consider that we were establishing a trade union in this case, although I recognized that some day it might evolve in that direction. As long as Embassy management dealt in a mature and responsive manner with the problems facing us—many of which, I found, were real problems deserving management's attention—I thought that we could manage a relationship with the Embassy local employees which would be mutually productive and satisfactory.

Certainly, in the somewhat more than two years that I served in Dhaka, I felt that relations with the Embassy local employees were managed satisfactorily. I've always thought that it was one of the better things that I did in the Foreign Service. In later years I have talked with some of those Foreign Service National employees who obtained immigrant visas and subsequently retired in the United States, under the arrangements made for Foreign Service National employees. I invited some of them out to my house in Virginia as recently as 1995. They recalled how that particular management approach worked and how grateful the Foreign Service National employees were to have this channel, which permitted things to get done and to address certain issues. Even if they couldn't be resolved, it was explained to them why they couldn't be resolved. I've always felt that that was an accomplishment during my service in Dhaka which was worth mentioning.

Q: Was inflation a major problem?

HELBLE: Not really, no. One problem that we had is that we would train air conditioner mechanics. Once we completed their training, they would almost immediately be recruited for service in the Middle East and work in Saudi Arabia, Iraq, or Kuwait at considerably higher salaries. That problem was not unique to the American Embassy in Bangladesh,

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although we had one of the better training programs in Dhaka for our employees. The same thing happened with good, household servants. Once household staff became efficient at the Ambassador's or my residence or in the homes of some other American or of a diplomat from another country, they could go off and earn perhaps 10 times as much in the Middle East. That was a different type of problem.

Q: What was the exchange rate between the U. S. dollar and the Bangladeshi currency?

HELBLE: Frankly, I can't remember.

Q: What was the Bangladeshi unit of currency?

HELBLE: It was the taka.

Q: So the exchange rate was not a big problem for the Americans serving in Dhaka?

HELBLE: No. The American problems involved primarily adequate housing and adequate support for that housing. I already mentioned air conditioning, refrigeration, and power. These things were not unique to Dhaka as Foreign Service challenges. Many Foreign Service posts have those kinds of problems.

Q: How were health conditions?

HELBLE: Of course, there was really no acceptable local, health support system. We had a State Department doctor and a nurse. This was very important. We had some serious, medical emergencies. People just had to be prepared to be evacuated medically if you suffered from anything serious. Local hospitalization was not a realistic option.

Q: Where would people be evacuated to? To Clark Field in the Philippines or...?

HELBLE: Yes, to Clark Field, depending on the circumstances—or to Bangkok. Not India. Probably not Clark Field unless treatment there was required on a temporary basis for

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someone enroute to the United States. We didn't have a lot of medical evacuations, but we had several, and I think that Bangkok or directly to the United States were the two places for external, medical care.

Q: How were relations between Bangladesh and Burma? Were they at all close? They are next door neighbors, but the Burmese had this concept of staying away from other foreigners, as much as possible.

HELBLE: There wasn't a great deal of contact between Burma and Bangladesh. As I mentioned earlier, the only significant hill country in Bangladesh was along the Burmese border. There were some frictions from time to time, primarily because of Bangladeshis who, you might say, "migrated" into Burma. They would go across the border and take up residence in Burma. After all, Bangladesh was a country which was almost literally "bulging at the seams" with people.

Q: So if they went to Burma, that shows how bad the situation was.

HELBLE: That's right, but they would tend to go into the western area of Burma, which was not the most populated area of the country. There were border frictions as a result of that sort of thing. Once in a while there would be some heated exchanges between the Bangladeshis and Burmese. "Dialogue" is not quite the right word. However, this was a very limited relationship, compared with Bangladesh's relationship with India.

About five months after we arrived in Bangladesh, that is, by November, 1979, we had a major crisis develop. It wasn't really a crisis that developed from events inside Bangladesh, but we had the "spinoff" from the seizure of the American Embassy in Tehran, followed by the burning of the Embassy in Islamabad Pakistan at the end of November, 1979, if I recall my dates correctly. A decision was made by the Department, within hours after the burning of the Embassy in Islamabad, to evacuate dependents and "non essential" personnel from 10 posts in the Middle East. Bangladesh was not then and is not today part of the Middle East. However, it came under the same bureau in the Department, the Bureau of

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Near Eastern Affairs, NEA. It was apparently felt in Washington that, since Bangladesh was a Muslim country with a capacity for inflamed attitudes toward Americans under the circumstances that had come up in the area between Pakistan and Iran, it would perhaps be prudent to cut back on the official American presence in Dhaka. This decision also affected other posts in the Middle East, properly speaking.

Q: Who made the decision as to who was “essential” and who was “non essential”? Did the Embassy make this decision, or the Department?

HELBLE: I was going to get into that because this was a very difficult subject. Our instructions from the Department were to reduce our official American staff by two-thirds and to evacuate ALL dependents, without exception. Ambassador Schneider told me that I would be responsible for organizing and coordinating this evacuation. He and I then coordinated decisions on who would go. We also had to involve the Mission Director of AID, the Agency for International Development, because a very high percentage of the people who would be leaving would be members of his staff. So, in that respect, it was a “Country Team effort.”

We quickly learned that calling people “non essential” and telling them that they should leave the country did not bring out a very positive attitude on the part of the recipients of this message. Most of those affected clearly felt that, if they were “non essential,” why were they sent to Bangladesh in the first place? So I suggested that we start using the “expendable” category. The “expendables,” such as the Ambassador and the DCM would remain in Bangladesh. The “non expendables” would be evacuated back to the United States. In any event that was more in jest than anything else. [Laughter]

From a high of about 88 official Americans we reduced to 28 Americans. Some people were happy to go, because this was just before Christmas. It was the first week of December, 1979, and some people said, “Great. I’ll be home for Christmas and will see my parents,” relatives, or whatever, in the U. S. Others said that they were “too important”

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to leave. They said that they had this or that project going or they wanted to stay out of genuine devotion to the Foreign Service or to their jobs. They didn't want to be left out of the action and so forth. It was a very difficult process, but we were not alone in this respect. Many other Foreign Service posts were going through the same process.

Some of our people couldn't understand why they were being evacuated, because we hadn't had any particular problem in Bangladesh. There were, however, intelligence reports regarding assassination threats targeted against the Ambassador and me. We couldn't tell for sure whether these were credible reports. Frankly, we didn't worry too much about them, but they existed.

Q: Were they mainly from CIA sources?

HELBLE: Yes. We certainly had grave concern about the security of the Embassy itself. The Embassy was in a high-rise, commercial building in the center of downtown Dhaka. If two trishaws bumped together in front of the building, there would be up to 200 people swarming around the scene of the accident in a matter of two minutes or so—all of them very agitated as to who was responsible for the accident, and so on.

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The Embassy building was virtually a “fire trap.” It was an older building with a core open to the sky which would have acted like a chimney in case of a fire. The Embassy was located on the top two floors of this six or seven story, commercial building. We really had no way of defending the Embassy, particularly if someone decided to “torch it.” We had a Marine Guard detachment of six Marines, but that would have been inadequate in the event of a real attack against the Embassy by an inflamed crowd.

So, after the torching of the American Embassy in Islamabad we spent several days, on orders from the Department, trying to secure everything that we could and cutting a “hatch” in the Communications Room through the ceiling to the roof which people could use to

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escape. That arrangement had saved some lives at the Embassy in Islamabad. We also updated our Embassy defense plans.

Our Regional Security Officer, who had been on leave in the United States, came back to Dhaka in the midst of this process, when we were trying to get everybody involved to evacuate. We were trying to “button down” the Embassy, reviewing all of the individual security arrangements and so on. To my total dismay the Regional Security Officer didn't turn up for work for two days after he returned from the United States, pleading that he was suffering from “jet lag.” We were in the midst of a genuine crisis. He should have been a key figure in making the arrangements. I shall never forgive the gentleman for that and I did not forgive him for the rest of his tour in Dhaka. It was a very poor performance on his part.

We eventually got the families out of Bangladesh. There were one or two “recalcitrants,” involving spouses who did not want to leave. However, in the final analysis, they went.

During the next three months we had serious morale problems, of course, with those who were left behind. I presume that morale was not very high among the families that were evacuated. The situation was probably all right through Christmas for most of the families who had gone off to the U. S. However, after Christmas people wanted to know, “When can we come back?” The Department was in charge of that decision. We had no say in that, although by mid-January we were suggesting to the Department that we did not see any further threats to the Embassy in Dhaka. However, the Department had a number of “eggs” to juggle, and we were not alone. At least, Ambassador Schneider and I appreciated that, although many of the people “down the line” could not understand why the Department was being so “slow” in sending people back to Dhaka.

Q: Did most of the dependents who left Dhaka return to the U. S., or did they go elsewhere?

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HELBLE: I think that they all went to the U. S., with perhaps one or two exceptions. In any event, we prepared a “news letter” which we telegraphed to the Department. The Department then circulated the “news letter” to the families to keep them up to date on what was going on, with little vignettes on who was doing what, and so on.

The AID Mission was very concerned because they were spending millions of dollars, but they no longer had a “monitoring” capability, which is always a critical function, particularly in a country like Bangladesh. There was a continuing question as to how the aid was being utilized. So there was a lot of genuine concern about that kind of issue.

However, we “muddled through.” The Administrative Counselor and I gave a big, New Year's Eve party at my house on December 31, 1979. It was a real “smash.” Of all things, we found a band, whose members got drunk before the party really started.

Q: Did anybody notice?

HELBLE: Yes. They couldn't play. [Laughter] We had to put on some taped music. We had “gate crashers” and so on, but we got through that.

Throughout this period, from early December, 1979, until well into January, 1980, the Ambassador and I rotated 12-hour shifts in the Embassy. We were concerned that if something happened and the Embassy were attacked when we were both in the office, there would be nobody “outside” to coordinate activities in the wake of a possible “disaster” at the Embassy. Ambassador Schneider is a particularly fair man, as I've said. One of us would take the noon to midnight “shift,” and the other would take the midnight to noon “shift.” So one of us was always at the Embassy and one of us was always outside the Embassy. We did that for six or eight weeks, I guess, before we felt that we could return to a more “normal” way of operating.

Q: What was the time differential between Dhaka and Washington?

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HELBLE: I think that Dhaka is 15 hours ahead of Washington.

On the whole, this was a trying time, but not unprecedented in the Foreign Service in recent years. Evacuations of this sort have become all too common from many posts and for many different reasons. This was the only time that I personally went through such an evacuation. I didn't find it a very pleasant experience.

Once the families and the two-thirds of the official American employees of the Embassy who had been evacuated returned to Dhak—if I recall correctly, in late February or early March, 1980—life returned to a more “normal” schedule. The workload at the Embassy was always considerable, but it was not as crushing a workload as I had experienced during my time in Vietnam or while serving in the front office of the Bureau of East Asian Affairs. There was time for tennis, and I played a great deal of that. There was time for socializing, which was, of course, an important activity in terms of morale in a place like Bangladesh, where there are very few recreational and entertainment outlets. Socializing at home, parties, movies, games, and that sort of thing filled in the gaps. We had a fairly active, representational life, entertaining and being entertained by many Bangladeshis and members of the diplomatic community.

Q: Were there still many British there in Bangladesh?

HELBLE: There were not many British. There was a British High Commission, of course, but it was not as active as the British High Commission had been in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. There were no large business interests keeping the British there, as was the case in Kuala Lumpur.

Q: Was there any industry at all in Bangladesh?

HELBLE: Just light industry—nothing very significant.

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Q: Occasionally, I see a shirt in a local store which was made in Bangladesh. This would have been “off shore” manufacturing, using American raw materials—the so-called “maquiladora” type of activity.

HELBLE: That's right, but that kind of activity was not going on in Bangladesh during my time there. As of now, garment manufacturing has become a factor in that very low cost labor environment. In that sense Bangladesh has tended to replace Taiwan or Singapore, which used to make such garments. Bangladesh is the kind of labor market that garment manufacturers want to turn to.

To touch on another subject, “Whitey” Watzman had become the editor of the Department of State monthly news magazine. He decided that he wanted to have an article in every issue of the magazine on the “Foreign Service Post of the Month.” He selected five posts in the five, geographic bureaus of the Department to start out with. He chose Dhaka as the post in the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs area. So he came to Dhaka. Whitey had never traveled outside the United States, much less to the Indian subcontinent. I put him up as my house guest. He did what he came to do: took pictures, did interviews, and so on. However, one morning Ambassador Schneider, my wife Joan, and I took Whitey out to a village market outside of Dhaka.

Certainly for me, but even for David Schneider, who had spent many years in the subcontinent, we encountered a scene which will last for our lifetimes. For Whitey it was a terrible shock. As we walked through this very dirty, crowded, hot, smelly, little village market, looking at the produce and the items available for sale, a boy about five or six years old began to “tag along” with us. This was not uncommon. There were beggars throughout the market, including deformed people, little children, and so on. This child continued to tag along with us. In his arms he carried a baby boy about three months old. Like the boy carrying him, the baby wore no clothes. In any event it took each of us a time to come to the realization that the baby the boy was carrying was dead. Nobody said anything until we got back to our van, got in, and started off for the return trip to Dhaka. His

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brother had been sent off by the parents to beg with the dead baby who had most likely died some time in the previous 12 hours. This was a begging ploy to get something out of the dead child. That's the kind of reality that you don't see in the United States—I don't care where you are.

For poor Whitey Watzman it was an “eye opener,” but I must confess that it was for the rest of us, too. Ambassador Schneider had seen things that were comparable, I guess, but even he was pretty shaken by it.

Q: You don't get used to that.

HELBLE: You don't get used to that.

We were able to travel outside of Dhaka to some extent—to Chittagong, to the hills in eastern Bangladesh along the Burmese border which I've referred to, and to a tea plantation up in the north. There was a very nice visit called the “Rocket Trip,” involving driving down alongside a river to pick up an overnight car ferry at the city of Khulna and return to Dhaka by water. That was very interesting. However, travel inside Bangladesh is difficult, the roads are poor, and, by and large, the hotel accommodations are miserable, at best. Reliable food outlets for Western stomachs are hard to come by. There really aren't a lot of “sights” to be seen in that country. There isn't a lot of historical and cultural architecture, striking scenery, and that sort of thing. So we didn't do a lot of traveling outside of Dhaka.

It might amuse some people if I said that we would take a “long weekend” for rest and recreation to the big city of Calcutta, in India. Some people might say, “Good God! You were taking 'R & R' in Calcutta?” Well, compared to Dhaka, it had a lot to offer.

Q: How far was Calcutta from Dhaka?

HELBLE: I think that it was a half hour or 40 minute flight—something like that.

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Q: Could you drive to Calcutta?

HELBLE: You could drive, although I never did it. There were problems involved in crossing rivers on ferries. I guess that some people drove, although I can't recall any specific case.

Q: Aren't the many mouths of the Ganges River collectively called the "Sundarbans," with islands along there? Isn't part of that area in Bangladesh?

HELBLE: I can't tell you how the mouths of the Ganges are divided. I know the area that you're talking about but I just don't recall the geographic division of that region.

Anyway, after about 16 months in Dhaka with only, I think, one trip to Calcutta for a weekend I decided that I should get away for a while. My wife Joan was working at a library. Our son Stuart had joined us in the spring of 1980 and had gotten a job at the International School, teaching physical education. I decided that I needed to get out of Bangladesh, and neither Joan nor Stuart could travel because of their job commitments. However, my daughter Mona, who was always a couple of months ahead in her studies, said that she could go with me.

So she and I went off for 22 days on one of those rare events for a father and daughter. We traveled to Kashmir, where we spent about 12 days. We stayed in a houseboat at Srinagar, on the lake, and visited glaciers, carpet manufacturers and weavers. We had a wonderful time. Then we went to New Delhi and saw something of that great city. We also visited the Taj Mahal. I had seen that previously, but Mona had not. Then we stopped off in Calcutta for a day or two with friends. So we had a wonderful, 22 day vacation. It was a great break for Mona and the only break I had during the time I was in Dhaka. However, first and foremost, it was a great opportunity for father and daughter to get to know each other better and share some common experiences. From a family point of view, that was one of the highlights of that tour, as far as I was concerned.

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My wife Joan found plenty to do. She served as President of the American Club for a while, at my request. The American Club had some Embassy support. We had had some problems with it. I wanted somebody to "straighten it out." So Joan took on the job for a year and dealt with some of the problems. She resumed jogging, which she'd been doing, off and on, over the years. She ran in 10 kilometer races, as did our daughter, Ramona.

Q: Who ran faster?

HELBLE: I'm not sure who ran faster, but Joan had more endurance. She had been "in training" much longer. Once he joined us, our son, Stuart, played a lot of tennis with me. So we had things to do and stayed busy.

Q: You mentioned the American Club. I take it that there was a non-official American community of some size.

HELBLE: Not very much.

Q: At one time, just after Bangladesh became independent, I understand that there were a lot of private American aid agencies represented in Bangladesh.

HELBLE: Yes, that is true. There were certainly such organizations as the Ford Foundation and other, non-governmental organizations that were associated with humanitarian and developmental aid activities in Bangladesh. A fair proportion of the membership of the American Club consisted of these non-official Americans.

As the summer of 1981 approached, it was time for me to be transferred to another post. I had promised my daughter Ramona that, when we left Dhaka, I would find a post where there would be, as she put it, a "reasonable facsimile of a high school." She had asked for this at my next posting. We were considering various options in that respect. I was asked by the Department if I would like to be assigned as Charg# d'Affaires in Kabul, Afghanistan.

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Q: How did this request come—from Personnel in the Department, a friend, or...?

HELBLE: This request came from Personnel, in a telegram from the Department. I said, “No,” not because Adolph “Spike” Dubs, the Ambassador, had been assassinated there a couple of years previously or because of the situation there. Rather, Kabul was not a place where I could take our daughter Ramona for her high school education.

Q: The Soviets were fairly well dug in at the time.

HELBLE: The Soviets occupied Afghanistan at that point, for all intents and purposes. So I said, “No” to this assignment because it didn't offer an opportunity for my daughter to complete her high school education.

I was also asked if I would be interested in being Ambassador to Papua-New Guinea. I checked and found that, again, the high school situation was not appropriate. So I said, “No, thank you” to that offer.

So for the time being I was left without an ongoing assignment. Meanwhile, Ambassador Schneider was getting ready to leave Bangladesh. He had made all of his farewell calls on the members of the cabinet and the President and was preparing to leave Bangladesh on a Monday morning in early July, 1981, as I recall. On the preceding Saturday morning at about 9:30 AM I received a phone call from a Bangladeshi contact who told me that President Zia ul-Haq had just been assassinated in Chittagong, apparently by military elements.

So I called the Ambassador, the chief of the CIA station, and the chief of the Political Section and told them of this report. We all went down to the Embassy. We were able to get confirmation within an hour or so that, in fact, President Zia had been assassinated. The murder had apparently occurred in a military compound in Chittagong, where he was spending the night. The regional commander in Chittagong, who was a rather prominent

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general, was believed to have been associated with the assassination plot. Ultimately, it turned out that he was so involved in the plot.

In Bangladesh a constitutional successor to President Zia was available. There was a Vice President. It happened that, at that time, he was very ill and was in the hospital in the military compound in Dhaka. He was a man without any particular political standing, which was why he was allowed to be Vice President. Given the realities in a country like Bangladesh, it immediately became very uncertain as to what was going to happen.

I suggested privately to Ambassador Schneider that it might be prudent for him to suggest to the Department that he not leave on the following Monday but rather stay another week or two and see how things went. I took this view because, in the Indian subcontinent, there is endemic suspicion of U. S. activities. The U. S. "hand" is always seen as somehow involved in any serious problems in the area. President Zia had been shot and killed on Saturday, and Ambassador Schneider was scheduled to leave on the following Monday. In my view there would be many people in Bangladesh who would say, "Ah ha! He's done it and now he's skipping out of the country." This was patently ludicrous unless you're a native of the subcontinent.

Q: Especially suspecting Dave Schneider of involvement in an assassination.

HELBLE: Right. In any event Ambassador Schneider said that was the conclusion that some people would draw. Such people consider it ridiculous to suggest that Ambassador Schneider was involved. His household effects had already been shipped. However, people born in the subcontinent would say, "Ah, that proves it! He knew that this was going to happen, so he sent his household effects out of the country ahead of him."

Anyhow, Ambassador Schneider recommended to the Department that he stay on in Dhaka for a week or two. The Department agreed, and he did stay on for a week or two.

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Meantime, Vice President Sattar demonstrated a remarkably swift recovery from his illness. Ambassador Schneider and I decided that this showed the effects of “the elixir of power.” Suddenly, Sattar was the President of Bangladesh. It had widely been believed that Sattar had been on his death bed in the military hospital in Dhaka. In any case Sattar struggled out of bed on Saturday afternoon, the day of the assassination. On Monday morning Ambassador Schneider and I went to call on President Sattar at the Presidential Palace. He had taken the oath of office as President and was sitting there, as “chipper” as could be. We were quite stunned. In any event Sattar remained in office as President for a substantial period of time after that, contrary to all predictions, because he had no power base of his own. However, he managed to stay in office for quite some time until he was replaced in later elections. This was a sad note to sound at the end of a tour. While no man in perfect, President Zia ul-Haq performed better than probably anybody else could have done, under the circumstances. President Zia's death was really a tragic loss for the country. However, Bangladesh has survived, as such countries tend to do.

Ambassador Schneider left Bangladesh two weeks later. I was Charg# d'Affaires for a few weeks, and then Jane Coon arrived as Ambassador. I overlapped with her for about two months. On September 30, 1981, I left Dhaka without any ongoing assignment. However, I was not at all concerned about that.

I would just like to make a few, general comments about what that tour of duty as DCM in Dhaka meant to me in several ways—or what I learned from it. Obviously, you don't recite everything that you have learned from an assignment. However, one of the things that struck me is that Bangladesh is a poor country materially, but is not necessarily “poor” in other respects. There is more of a sense of nationhood and of pride in that country than, I think, I would expect to see in many other, developing countries. You won't find poverty in many countries which is greater than it is in Bangladesh, although perhaps Somalia would be an example of greater poverty. Later, I had an opportunity to go to Somalia. This was long before Somalia became a “front page story” in the United States.

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Q: Was this when you were a Foreign Service Inspector?

HELBLE: No, this was a couple of years later when I was Political Adviser to CINCPAC [Commander in Chief, Pacific]. I think that Somalia was materially poorer than Bangladesh. It was clearly poorer than Bangladesh in the sense I just mentioned—that is, the sense of nationhood. I think that Bangladesh is essentially a country that is culturally “confident.” It is basically dominated by a moderate, Islamic culture. Hopefully, Bangladesh can remain a moderate, Islamic culture. That provides a certain element of confidence in terms of cultural identification and certainty.

Personally, I had benefitted from my experience in the Inspection Corps, during which I learned a lot about management styles. That helped me a great deal as a DCM. Each situation is, of course, unique. However, the principle of top management in an Embassy caring about what is happening to the lower levels of the diplomatic mission is certainly a principle which carries over, regardless of where you are. Ambassador David Schneider was “first rate” in that respect. He certainly encouraged me to be concerned as well about the situation of people “down the line.” In a country like Bangladesh, if you don't have Mission support, if you don't have the support of the other people in the Mission, as well as physical support, you're really going to have morale, productivity, and effectiveness problems.

It all started with Ambassador Schneider. He was the kind of leader who provided guidance in that way. I think that that's about all that I want to say on Bangladesh. Let's take a break now and then I'll go on to my assignment as Political Adviser to CINCPAC.

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Q: John, we left this where you were just finishing up your tour as DCM in Bangladesh. You did not have an ongoing assignment but you were not concerned. What happened? Did you get home leave after your two years in Bangladesh? Then what happened?

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HELBLER: Well, after about 28 months in Bangladesh I really needed a break, so we took a relaxed trip home—that is, Joan, Ramona, and I. Our son Stuart had left Bangladesh a couple of months previously. So the three of us returned to the U. S. via Rangoon and Bangkok. We also visited Europe, including London and so on. We visited relatives in the U. S. and returned to Falls Church, VA, in late November, 1981, just before Thanksgiving. We “house sat” at a friend's house for a couple of months and then “house sat” at another house for several months. Our daughter, Ramona, was able to “talk her way” into a local high school as a junior, even though she was three weeks late for “late registration,” according to the high school principal. However, she persuaded him that she'd get the job done and, as she always did, she got it done. So she spent that academic year, or perhaps two-thirds of her junior year at a high school in Falls Church, VA.

Meanwhile, I kept taking home leave for periods of 30 days at a time. I had accumulated a lot of home leave over the years which I had never been able to utilize. The regulations said that I could only take 30 days of accumulated leave at a time. However, the Department kept extending my home leave for a period which totaled about three months.

Q: You were theoretically assigned to the NEA Bureau?

HELBLER: I guess so. I didn't really report to anybody but I guess that that's correct. NEA prepared my “time and attendance” reports.

Then I was assigned for about two to three months, on a temporary basis, to the “Grievance Staff” of the Department, which deals with evaluating grievances that have been filed and which then submits that staff work to the “Grievance Board” for its determination of subsequent action. That was not a very exciting assignment, but, as with every assignment that I ever had, there was something to be said about its being an “eye opener” and a learning experience. One certainly saw all kinds of problems which people either had or felt that they had, as well as the difficulty of reconciling grievance situations with what was proper for the Department, on the one hand, or for the individual, on the

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other hand. Not much need be said about this brief assignment except that I didn't object to it.

Meanwhile, I was sticking to the two criteria that I had identified the year before to the Department as to what I wanted in an assignment. One criterion was that I wanted my next assignment to be overseas because I expected that this would be my last tour of duty abroad. I had said that I intended to retire after that assignment. I had spent a majority of my career in the U. S. I hadn't asked for that but had accepted it when I was told that this or that was my next assignment. Secondly, I wanted an assignment where my daughter Ramona could complete high school. I was not concerned about what the position was, what the function was, or what the grade level would be—just as long as the next assignment met those two criteria.

I was then told that I would have to go to what was called the “Senior Seminar in Foreign Policy” at the Foreign Service Institute in the fall of 1982. The Director General of the Foreign Service—Carol Laise at the time—was reported to be determined that people selected for this one year training assignment would, in fact, take that training and would not “escape it,” as some people wanted to do. I was further told that I was listed first among those officers selected for the Senior Seminar course that year. Therefore, the Director General was determined that I was going to go to the Senior Seminar. I was the case example as far as she was concerned.

Q: What year was this?

HELBLE: That would have been 1982. Well, at that point I told the Senior Assignments Counselor who informed me of this that I was retiring after my next assignment and that it made no sense for me, the Department, or the American taxpayer to spend a year in training and then do a single, two-year assignment before retiring. Well, he couldn't argue with that but said that I would have to put it in writing that I was going to retire. I said that I would be pleased to do so, if that was what it would take. So I did that.

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Eventually, I received a phone call from Personnel, saying that Admiral Robert Long, the Commander-in-Chief, Pacific, had asked the Department of State to assign me as his Political Adviser. The position of a Political Adviser, or "POLAD," as it is abbreviated, is at a unified command, such as the Pacific Command, or CINCPAC, as it is usually referred to. It is a foreign affairs advisory position. It is not "political" in the sense of the Democrats versus the Republicans or involving domestic politics or anything of that sort. A foreign affairs adviser is a Foreign Service Officer who fills this kind of slot.

Well, I said to the Senior Personnel Counselor that I did not understand why I was being asked to fill this position. Certainly, there must be many people who had "bid," under our personnel system, for the position. He acknowledged that this was the case and that there had been 74 officers who had "bid" for this job. I said, "But I was not one of them." He said, "No, but Admiral Long wants you." Well, this is an example of how little the "bidding process" really means. To have someone who hadn't asked for the job assigned to it when there were 74 people lined up who wanted it is ridiculous.

In any event, I said, "No, that wouldn't do because, while there's a suitable high school in Honolulu for my daughter, this is not an overseas assignment," and I wanted my last assignment in the Foreign Service to be overseas. I told my family about this exchange at dinner that evening. They all looked at me as if they thought that I had completely "flipped out." They made it clear to me that that's what they thought.

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So, after the family discussion I called the Senior Personnel Counselor back the next day and said that I would accept the assignment as CINCPAC POLAD because my family thought that I would be "crazy" to turn it down.

The long and the short of it was that we went off to Honolulu. Just before we left for Honolulu in June, 1982, our son Stuart was married to his high school sweetheart.

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Subsequently, they have developed their own lives as pewtersmiths. Of course, I had assumed that my first born child would become a pewtersmith. That's a logical thing to expect!

Q: And he's a very good one, too, I must say. I have a couple of pieces of pewter which he made.

HELBLER: So we went to Honolulu—that is, Joan, Ramona, and I. We settled in a house in the Aiea section of Honolulu, off the naval base at Pearl Harbor. This was contrary to the desire of Admiral Long. All of my predecessors as Political Advisers at CINCPAC had lived at the CINCPACFLT (Commander-in-Chief, Pacific Fleet) housing area in Makalapa. It had been expected that we would live in the house usually allocated to the State Department representative on the Admiral's staff.

Just before I left the Department in Washington enroute to Honolulu, I had become aware that the regulations stated that if I lived in the house in Makalapa, I would have to give up most of my cost of living allowance in Honolulu. This was a very substantial allowance because the cost of living in Honolulu is much higher than it is in Washington. The Executive Director of the East Asian Bureau, whose name I forget at this point, said, “Well, don't pay any attention to that regulation. None of your predecessors gave up their COLA (Cost of Living Allowance). Just ignore that.” I said, “No, now that I understand what the regulation is. Since the Navy charges 'full price' rent to me, I see no advantage to staying in Makalapa and also having a substantial reduction in my Cost of Living Allowance. So I'm going out and buy a house.”

I proceeded to do so. Admiral Long was not happy at all about this, but he was “stuck” with the fact that he had asked me to come out to Honolulu. And the first thing I did was to tell him that I wasn't going to obey his orders and live in the CINCPACFLT housing area! Well, in due time, we overcame any annoyance that may have been caused. He thought that I should be “rubbing shoulders” with my colleagues at work, socially, in the evenings. That

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was fine, but I didn't have to "live on base" to do that. I pointed out that we were talking about a naval housing area. He was commander in chief of one of the unified commands, with Army, Air Force, and Marine elements in it. All of these other officers lived outside of the naval housing area in other, military residential areas. Therefore, if I just lived with the admirals on the Navy base, this would not involve regular association with all of the elements of the command, as it existed. He couldn't argue with this analysis but he didn't like it, either.

The two and a half years that we spent in Honolulu were, in many ways, the most gratifying for me, from the professional point of view, that I ever had during my entire career in the Department of State. This was fortuitous since it was, as I intended it to be, my last assignment. One would like to go out on a "high note." From the point of view of the work that I was involved in and the activities which engaged me, I felt more useful, more relevant, and more influential than I had felt in any previous assignment. This is not to deprecate my previous assignments but rather to say that this assignment to Honolulu was the best, in that respect.

The Political Adviser to CINCPAC or, as I said, the foreign affairs adviser, works directly for the Commander-in-Chief, Pacific. This was not the Pacific Fleet or the Pacific Air Force or the Army in the Pacific. It covered all three of them. The command area of CINCPAC extends all the way from the West Coast of the United States to the East Coast of Africa. It includes two-thirds of the surface of the world. Of course, most of that is water, or at least a very high percentage of it is water.

Some years previously, when I was at the Embassy in Kuala Lumpur, Admiral Noel Gaylor, who was then CINCPAC, visited Malaysia and gave a briefing to senior Malaysian military officers. During the briefing which he gave, and which I attended, Admiral Gaylor had a viewgraph projected on a screen showing the geographic dimensions of the CINCPAC area of responsibility, which I have just described. With a flourish Admiral Gaylor ran his pointer across all of this area and said, "This is all under my command."

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Of course, this included Malaysia. What he meant, of course, was that all U. S. military activity in that area was under his command. However, the way this statement came across was that Malaysia, as a country, as well as the other countries of the area, were under CINCPAC's command. The point is, though, that the CINCPAC command area covers a very extensive piece of real estate, over which CINCPAC has the responsibility to defend U. S. security interests. He uses a State Department officer to help him to navigate through the political intricacies and complexities and the foreign affairs problems of this area which might affect U. S. security interests.

You can be an expert in a portion of that region but you can't be an expert on all of it. I certainly was not an expert on all of it. However, I did come to this job reasonably well equipped to handle it, thanks to the several years I had spent in the front office of the East Asian Bureau, where I was exposed to all of the East Asian problems. These problems had not fundamentally changed that much between the time I left the East Asian Bureau in 1976 and the assumption of my duties in Honolulu in June, 1982. I had just come from my assignment as DCM in Bangladesh, in the Indian subcontinent, which was another area of interest and concern to CINCPAC.

The types of issues that were being addressed by CINCPAC involved base rights in the Philippines, Japan, and Korea, to some extent. Freedom of the seas issues would come up involving, for example, transit through the Straits of Malacca, the general law of the sea conference which was then going on, and the Taiwan Straits. Of course, the issue of freedom of the seas is a major consideration for the U. S. Navy. In point of fact, while there are Army and Air Force components in CINCPAC as a unified command, this is first and foremost a naval command.

Another issue of interest to CINCPAC was the expansion of Soviet power in what we used to call the "Soviet Far East." In that region, both on the Asian continent and concerning Russia and the Soviet Union as such, the extension of Russian and Soviet power was of particular interest to CINCPAC, particularly during the post-Vietnam War period. During

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this time the Soviets began to build up their fleet—and particularly their submarine fleet—and their air base structure—particularly on the Kamchatka Peninsula and in other areas of the Soviet Far East. Then they began to extend their power into Southeast Asia, having acquired access to bases in Communist Vietnam in the late 1970's. By the time I arrived in Honolulu in 1982 this expansion of Soviet military power in the Far East was becoming a matter of considerable concern to U. S. security forces and, therefore, to the Pacific Command in Honolulu.

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Q: John, you were talking about base issues, freedom of the sea, and so on. Please continue.

HELBLE: Countering the growth in the Soviet threat was, of course, the first and foremost responsibility of CINCPAC. That meant enhancement of U. S. naval, air, and ground forces, but especially naval and air capabilities. However, it also meant, in the mind of a smart Commander-in-Chief, Pacific, enhancing our relationships with countries in the region which could be of assistance and could contribute, in one fashion or another, to the development of a solid “front” to deal with the expansion of Soviet power in the area. Admiral Long was such a “smart” Commander-in-Chief, Pacific, as was his successor, Admiral William J. Crowe. Both had strong diplomatic skills and instincts, which made my job much easier.

The Soviets had long virtually ignored the Pacific area or had not had much success in penetrating much of East Asia. However, once the Sino-Soviet dispute erupted publicly in the 1960s, the Chinese had, in effect, separated themselves from the type of relationship which they had had with the Soviets in the early 1950's. At sea Soviet and U. S. submarines often played “tag,” monitoring each other's moves. We monitored the Soviet submarine base at Petropavlovsk in the northern Pacific and the Soviet naval base at Vladivostok, using a lot of “assets and resources,” such as overhead photography and

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so forth. We also monitored the Soviet base facilities that they were developing at Nha Trang and Camranh Bay in Vietnam, which were seen as a “direct threat” to our bases in the Philippines at Subic Bay, a naval base, and Clark Air Force Base. By the early 1980's concern over the expansion of Soviet military power in East Asia was much more acute than it had been earlier, when we still had facilities in Vietnam.

We were also faced with the reality that our own credibility in much of the East Asian area had suffered significantly as a result of the collapse of our position in Vietnam and the North Vietnamese victory in that country. Many of the countries of Southeast Asia were fairly skeptical about U. S. intentions and the firmness of the U. S. commitment over the coming years. So we had to overcome that.

With the advent of the administration of President Reagan and the buildup of U. S. military power, some of this concern among the countries of Southeast Asia began to ease. Secretary of State George Shultz was a keen advocate of U. S. interests in the East Asian area. He believed that this area would have a tremendous impact on the United States in the future—probably more than Europe. He paid close attention to East Asian developments and was supportive of U. S. military efforts and security interests in the area. He also did a great deal to establish enhanced relationships with the Japanese, Koreans, and others who might have been shaken, to some extent, by the outcome of the Vietnam War.

Of course, the U. S. had a fairly extensive military presence in much of East Asia, aside from the presence of major military forces in Hawaii itself which, after all, is nearly halfway across the Pacific from the West Coast of the continental United States. At that time we had about 50,000 troops on the Korean peninsula, major Air Force and Navy elements based in Japan and the U. S. Marines in Okinawa, and we had the naval and air facilities at Subic Bay and Clark Field in the Philippines.

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The base facilities in the Philippines increasingly tended to be held hostage to Filipino nationalism. As the Philippines itself was suffering economically, they sought more “rent,” as they called it, for our use of the facilities at Subic Bay and Clark Field. There were even elements in the Philippines which sought to have U. S. bases removed from the Philippines entirely. This was the type of problem with which I would become very much involved, because it had its political context, as well as the military requirements which had to be dealt with.

I traveled repeatedly to the Philippines with the Commander-in-Chief, Pacific—first with Admiral Long and then with Admiral Crowe. During these visits we discussed these matters with a wide variety of Filipinos, from President Ferdinand Marcos on down. We had many meetings and consultations regarding them in Honolulu. We would go to the mainland of the United States, to Washington, D. C., and have consultations on these issues. It was a constant concern to us.

However, it seemed evident to me that the U. S. military, sooner or later, was going to have to accept the reality that it was going to lose access to those facilities at Subic Bay and Clark Field. It was like “pulling teeth” to get our military people to address what the alternatives to the Philippine bases were and what could be feasibly developed and where. Would it be at Palau or should we add more elements in Guam, where we already had substantial military forces? Were there ship repair facilities in Singapore which could be obtained and which would be reliable substitutes for some of the work being done at Subic Bay? It was very difficult to get anybody in the U. S. military services to admit that the day might come, and probably would come, when the Philippine bases would no longer be available to us.

Meantime, we had to renegotiate the Philippine base agreements every five years or so. We were in the midst of negotiations on those agreements in 1983 and 1984. Ultimately, those agreements were successfully renegotiated, but at a cost which, I think, finally awakened many of our military people to the realization that some day we would need to

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get along without the Philippine bases. That realization developed rather quickly during the latter part of the 1980's. Surprisingly enough, I don't think that U. S. military power in the Pacific has suffered significantly from the loss of what were regarded as two, "keystone" military bases for many years, following World War II.

Q: I spent a year in the Political Section of the Embassy in Manila, 1966-1967. As I look back on it, it had occurred to me that we had fought most of World War II in the Pacific without access to Clark or Subic. We lost access to them almost immediately in early 1942. I thought that the idea that we had to have these bases to fight a major war was ridiculous and contrary to our own experience. These bases were very convenient, but I think that you were right that they were bound to go. They finally were closed down after the eruption of Mt. Pinatubo, but that is a ridiculous way to have it happen. This should have been anticipated well in advance.

HELBLE: I spent about 40 percent of my time as CINCPAC POLAD in Honolulu traveling with the Commander-in-Chief, a four-star admiral. I had quite a bit of status in the command because I was accorded three-star rank (i.e., the equivalent of Vice Admiral or Lieutenant General). I was equal to but ranked after the Deputy CINCPAC, who was an Army Lieutenant General. That protocol ranking tended to enhance my contribution to discussions of various issues that came up from time to time in this military setting. I didn't feel like a three-star admiral or general, but if that is what the U. S. military considered me, that's what I had to live with, and I felt that I might as well make the best of it.

I would travel with the Admiral and would be second on board the aircraft. We would either fly East to Washington, D. C., for consultations with people in the State Department and the Pentagon, budget hearings, Congressional hearings in general, or budget presentations to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Or we would fly West, to Japan, Korea, the Philippines, often to Australia or New Zealand, and sometimes much farther afield. In December, 1983, I traveled with Admiral Long all the way to Kenya, where we had some military cooperation agreements in effect. We also flew to Somalia and Oman, via the well-

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known island of Diego Garcia, which I had never thought that I would see. Anyhow, I saw it. It looked like any other, tropical island or atoll.

There was a lot of travel, involving long distances because of the geographical considerations that I previously mentioned. Usually, it was four or five thousand miles between takeoff and first landing, as we went to these various places. The travel was hard work for me because I would be involved in preparing briefing papers for the Admiral for his various meetings, whether it was with an American Ambassador, a Prime Minister, the President of Korea, or whoever. I would usually accompany the Admiral on those visits and would frequently be the note taker. Sometimes I would even draft the reporting telegram to the Department of State on the meeting for the Embassy, as well as the reporting telegram to the Joint Chiefs of Staff from the Admiral. In addition, there were such minor things as "toasts." However, if there is a luncheon and a dinner every day at which the Admiral had to give a toast, just drafting the toasts became a bit of a chore. I was always busy on the plane and didn't get much sleep, but it was interesting work and gave me access to some of the "big names" and "big people" throughout the region.

In the case of a call on the Prime Minister in Thailand, for example, I usually wound up accompanying the Admiral to his office or to the Defense Minister's office, depending on the circumstances. So it was interesting. The U. S. military knows how to travel in style. We had our own Boeing 707 aircraft KC-135 with a VIP conversion suite installed. The meals on board the aircraft were good. The air crew took very good care of what was generally a small party accompanying the Admiral. We always had good accommodations wherever we went. It was a convenient way of traveling, but we covered an awful lot of territory and got a lot done on every one of these trips.

Q: While you were CINCPAC POLAD, were you the only State Department officer there, or did you have a State Department staff?

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HELBLER: I was the only State Department officer there. There was a USIA (United States Information Agency) representative there, but he did not participate in the same type of activities as I did and did not have the same "standing" at CINCPAC Headquarters. My staff consisted of two civilian secretaries. I also had an Air Force Major, who was later replaced by an Air Force Lieutenant Colonel assigned to me, whom I had selected after interviewing them. I didn't have a big staff. When I was on a trip with the Admiral, the Air Force Lieutenant Colonel would look after things back in my office in Honolulu and call me on the radio if he needed help in handling them. Since I was traveling with CINCPAC, there usually wasn't all that much that came up at headquarters that wasn't referred to the CINCPAC plane, wherever that was.

When we were in Honolulu, it was always busy in headquarters, but very rarely did I have to put in extra long hours. For the first time in my life I learned to go to work by 7:00 AM, a habit which I have kept since I retired, and I don't have any problem with it. I had always been a late sleeper. However, living in a military command disciplined me in another direction.

On a typical day I would report to the office at 7:00 AM. We would have the commander's briefing at 8:00 AM, with about 50 senior officers present. The Admiral's immediate staff, including me, also attended. The commander's briefing would take about a half hour. This allowed me to catch up on everything that was going on in the area.

Then 10 or 11 senior members of the Admiral's staff, all of them of flag rank, would have a meeting in the Admiral's office. Admiral Long was a submariner. I never understood until after he left why he handled the meeting after the command briefing as he did. We would file into the Admiral's office from the command briefing and would then assemble in a semi-circle in front of Admiral Long while he would sit at his desk. He would start with the most junior officer on his left and work around to the end that I was on, with the other three-star officer. He would ask each one what he had to report.

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Q: You were still standing up?

HELBLE: We were still standing up. If there was any issue for decision, the Admiral would make the decision. In any event, I never understood this “standing up” business. Apparently, that came from the way things are done in a submarine. There isn't space in the wardroom or in the commander's office for a “sit down” staff meeting. So everybody came in and stood in a semi-circle in front of the Admiral's desk.

Admiral Crowe replaced Admiral Long as CINCPAC in December, 1983. Although Admiral Crowe had also been a submariner, he had the morning staff meeting in a small conference room, with those attending sitting around a table, in a more traditional manner. It was a noticeable difference in “style” and said something about the different styles of the two admirals.

Generally, Admiral Long and I got along well. We had occasional differences of view, but I never had any serious problem with him. I learned that you didn't joke lightly at the morning staff meeting, a tendency which I previously exhibited. Admiral Long didn't care for any levity during the staff meeting or during any business activity. He had a good sense of humor outside of that context, but he was “all business” during the day. He was very “military” in his attitudes and his bearing.

I remember an incident at one of these morning, “stand up” staff meetings. A rear admiral, who headed one of the CINCPAC Directorates, expressed one point of view on a given issue. Someone else expressed a different opinion. Admiral Long made his decision counter to the rear admiral's recommendation. Later, the rear admiral returned to the issue and tried to reopen the discussion and obtain a reversal of Admiral Long's decision. Admiral Long cut off the rear admiral in no uncertain terms. A couple of his military colleagues who were present at the meeting later told me that that episode was the end of this rear admiral's chance of becoming a vice admiral. In other words, reopening a question which Admiral Long had already decided “did him in.” They were dead serious

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about it. That was the sort of thing that you would not see, generally speaking, in the State Department. But it's different with the military.

Q: You get one "at bat."

HELBLER: Right. Admiral Long and I got along pretty well, and, I thought, he used me pretty effectively. However, we had differences, and one of them concerned the Philippine bases issue. He wanted very much to be designated the "lead negotiator" in the discussions with the Filipinos. That is, he wanted to "control" the course of the negotiations and have one of his senior Navy people do the actual negotiation on the ground in the Philippines when we renegotiated the base agreements.

I knew that Mike Armacost, who was the Ambassador to the Philippines at that time, intended to be the "lead negotiator" himself on the bases negotiation. Admiral Long had a great deal of "cachet" and influence in Washington, and he tried to use it in this case so that he would be designated as the "lead negotiator." I had told him that he was wrong to pursue this and I even wrote him a personal memorandum on the subject—from me to him—to record this view. This did not please him at all. He clearly thought that I was being "disloyal" to him.

In this memorandum I had told him that any Ambassador worth his salt, and there was no question in my mind that Mike Armacost was such an Ambassador, would insist that he be in charge of negotiations on the most important question with that country—subject, of course, to instructions from Washington. However, he would have to be the man controlling the negotiations on so critical an issue as the bases agreement with the Philippines. He wouldn't have been a worthy Ambassador if he didn't take that position. Furthermore, Armacost was a smart enough person to understand perfectly well what the U. S. military interests were in the Philippines. He was not the kind of person who would "run over" or ignore U. S. military interests.

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As I said, Admiral Long didn't like the advice that I gave him. I sensed for a time that I had thereby lost a little of the confidence which he previously had in me. Some years later, after I had retired, Admiral Long said to me in my own living room after dinner, in the presence of several other people, including Ambassador Jack Lydman and several other, fellow dinner guests, that he really respected my "standing up" to him, because nobody else in CINCPAC would do that. Well, nobody else in the command would do that because they would never be promoted again—that's for sure. Admiral Long said that it wasn't always easy dealing with me, but I was always honest in terms of what I thought I should say. He respected my position.

That is a situation where a Political Adviser is in a very difficult position. You are detailed to work for a military commander. However, you are also regarded as "carrying the ball" for your home agency—and in some circumstances may be perceived as "disloyal" to the commander. It was always a bit "tricky" to deal with those concerns in the military command. You had to show them that you really had "their" interests at heart and weren't just expressing a "parochial" State Department view. That was the most dramatic example of such issues during my time at CINCPAC.

Admiral Crowe replaced Admiral Long as CINCPAC and was a very different kind of person. As I said, at the first staff meeting, we did not have a "stand up" meeting after the command briefing. We went into the conference room and sat down. Some 15 minutes into the meeting Admiral Crowe made some statement regarding India that I regarded as "provocative" and inaccurate. I quietly took issue with what he had said and suggested that, perhaps, he didn't have this quite right. He dug his heels in, and we ended up having a real, first-class argument at the table at the first staff meeting since he had taken command. All of the other flag officers sat there and watched this silently. Admiral Crowe finally ended the discussion and finished the meeting.

As I walked out, a couple of colleagues caught up with me and said to me, "John, you've just burned your bridges. You're out of here." I said, "I don't think so with this guy. With

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Admiral Long, yes. Not with this guy.” And I was right. Admiral Crowe was looking for people who would say, “You’re wrong.” He wanted to be told when he was wrong. He was a big enough man that he could take that. In that sense he immediately reminded me and, subsequently, on many other occasions, of the other, truly “great man” that I had the opportunity to work for, Phil Habib (former Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian Affairs). They both had that same characteristic. They were both confident enough and secure enough in their own judgment and knowledge that they didn’t feel personally “threatened” if someone disagreed with them. They wanted to hear disagreement and argumentation. They wanted the disagreement to be well grounded, intelligently presented, and logical.

I had what I considered a wonderful relationship with Admiral Crowe from then on. It was very similar to the relationship I had had with Phil Habib. In some ways it was even closer. Admiral Crowe had ordered that literally nothing of any substance was to go onto Admiral Crowe’s desk that hadn’t gone through me—at least for a perfunctory look. Frequently, that practice brought me into touch with things that I didn’t know anything about. I pleaded with Admiral Crowe or his Executive Officer to keep me out of things I was not familiar with. “No,” the Admiral said, “I want you to look at it.” That gives you a “warm, fuzzy feeling,” and it can go to your head. However, if you saw the complexity of some of the things that were coming across my desk, you’d be crazy to let it go “to your head.” You’d say, “Geez, they’re out of their minds even letting me look at this stuff, let alone passing judgment on it.” So, on things that I didn’t feel qualified to judge, I didn’t express a judgment.

In any event it was a good position to be in because Admiral Crowe was easy to work for. He took me everywhere he went and included me in virtually every meeting of any significance. I think that I was able to serve him well and to help him. He had such a good head on his shoulders that he needed less help than the average senior officer. He is very smart. All you had to do was to say something once or just give him a clue, and he’d pick

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it right up. He had a Ph. D. from Princeton in international relations, which is more than I had.

Particularly during the period when Admiral Crowe was CINCPAC, one of the issues which had become acute was U. S. naval visits to New Zealand. Tom, you'll remember that issue from your time on the Australia-New Zealand desk. As the political forces moved to the Left in New Zealand, the New Zealand government adopted increasing support for the concept of a "nuclear free zone" in the South Pacific. The New Zealand government did not want any U. S. Navy ships visiting a New Zealand port unless we declared that there were no nuclear weapons on board. This was in conflict with a policy which we had "set in concrete," in the sense that we declined to confirm or deny whether there were any such weapons on U. S. Navy ships. This issue had major implications for other areas of the world which were much more important to us than New Zealand. If we broke the rule in the case of New Zealand, we would have to do so elsewhere. So we were at loggerheads with New Zealand.

Throughout this "dialogue" with New Zealand, if you can call it that, and while I was still in Honolulu, Admiral Crowe and I spent countless hours discussing this issue with New Zealand political and military officials, both in New Zealand and in Honolulu. This was an issue on which I could "help" Admiral Crowe as much as anyone because it was more "political" than anything else. That was one of the interesting things that I got involved in. Ultimately, that issue was frustrating. In the final analysis, for all intents and purposes, it brought an end to the "ANZUS" alliance between Australia, New Zealand, and the U. S., as we had known it.

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Of course, there were many other issues. There were our military relationships with the Republic of Korea. We traveled frequently to Korea. There were joint exercises held regularly with the South Koreans. The question of U. S. troop levels in South Korea was

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often discussed. There was growing pressure, including budgetary and political pressures in the United States, to reduce the size of the ground forces that we had in Korea, which then totaled about 50,000 troops. The level of our forces in Korea in 1996 is about 37,000 troops. The downward movement in the size of our forces really started in the 1980's. At least the impetus was in a downward direction.

Similarly, there were discussions on base issues with Japan. There were frictions involving U. S. training exercises, which impacted on Japanese communities. These were among the matters that I was involved in. I would be in touch with the Embassy in Tokyo regarding them and with elements in the State Department who dealt with this issue. I served as a liaison officer and a channel of communication, keeping Admiral Crowe informed of the thinking in the various, non-military departments and Embassies of the U. S. Government.

A few months before I left Honolulu President Reagan was coming through Honolulu, enroute to China and Japan. The President stopped in Honolulu. Admiral Crowe had been asked to brief him for 30 minutes at the President's hotel. The day before President Reagan arrived in Honolulu, I was called into Admiral Crowe's office and found that several members of his senior staff were discussing with him the briefing papers that had been prepared for this meeting with the President. Admiral Crowe asked me what I thought of the briefing papers.

Contrary to the standard procedure in the office, these briefing papers had not been shown to me. I looked at them and said, "Admiral, this is the first time I have seen them." He said, "Well, what do you think of them?"

I said that I hadn't read all of them but, after a glance at them, I said that I didn't think that it was at all an appropriate briefing for the President. The thrust of this briefing was, "Mr. President, we need more torpedoes in our storage facilities. We need more boots for the troops." I said, "I don't think that you should spend 30 minutes of precious time talking to the President of the United States on these matters. You should talk about

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presidential-level issues. You should talk about the region he is going to visit, what your impression of that region is, and what problems, if any, you think he should be aware of and address while he's there. You should discuss geopolitical issues, not matters involving the numbers of torpedoes in the bins or boots for the troops. You have plenty of places you can talk to in Washington to get more torpedoes in the bins." He said, "All right. You write the briefing." So I went back to my office and did that. The next day he went off to see President Reagan. Secretary of State George Shultz was the only other person present at the meeting. The scheduled 30-minute briefing went on and on, with the President continuing to ask questions. Finally, after a 90 minute meeting Admiral Crowe returned to his office. I asked him how it had gone. He said that the President was very interested and kept him there, asking questions and so forth. That evening Secretary of State George Shultz took me aside at a small dinner and said, "That boss of yours is really something. I've never seen President Reagan sit at a briefing for 90 minutes—interested and staying awake!" He said, "It was an incredibly good briefing. I enjoyed it and was fascinated by it, too."

Well, I felt pretty good about that because I had had some role in "turning it around." On the other hand, I also knew that since Admiral Crowe was so articulate, intellectual, and good humored—for he always worked humor into his briefings—all that I had to do was to make sure that he took the right fork on the path. He would carry the briefing off on his own, which he did.

Five months later I had left Honolulu, had retired from the Foreign Service, and was back in Washington. Admiral Crowe was then appointed Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, a very unexpected appointment. When he was sworn in as Chairman, I attended the ceremony and had an opportunity to chat with him afterwards. He said that he had never expected this assignment, particularly since he had had only one encounter with the President—and that was the briefing which I've just described. He very graciously suggested that I might have had something to do with his appointment as Chairman

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because of the role I had played in the briefing. I doubt that that was the case, but it's nevertheless a nice thing to think and to have suggested to me.

As an aside, Admiral Crowe said, "You know, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff does not have a Political Adviser. I think that that's a great oversight and I think that you and I should do something about this." I said, "Do you mean that you want me to come out of retirement?" He said, "Well, why not?" I said, "No way. There are too many other good things that I want to do. Besides that, I don't think that anybody in the State Department would be very happy if I 'wedged' some guy on active duty out of a position like that, if you ever get it created." He was never able to get the position of Political Adviser to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff established.

The Honolulu tour as Political Adviser was coming to an end. I might say that my wife Joan worked throughout the time that we were there as a physical therapist at Kuikini Hospital in downtown Honolulu. Ramona did her senior year at Aiea High School in Honolulu and then went off to Dickinson College in Carlisle, PA, during the second year that we were in Honolulu. We had an opportunity to travel to all of the outer islands in Hawaii on vacation at one time or another. I had some opportunity for golf and tennis. Admiral Crowe liked to play tennis a lot. We often played tennis at noon at CINCPAC Headquarters. Honolulu was obviously a wonderful place to live, and we thoroughly enjoyed it.

Several months before the end of my tour in Honolulu Admiral Crowe's Executive Officer, Joe Strasser, told me one day that Paul Wolfowitz, who was then the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian Affairs, would be in Honolulu the next day and would be at Admiral Crowe's house for lunch. The Admiral wanted me to be at the lunch. I knew that Wolfowitz was coming through Honolulu. I said that that would be fine. The Executive Officer said, "By the way, you should know that you're going to be consulted about being appointed Ambassador to either Singapore or Malaysia. Admiral Crowe, Wolfowitz, and Phil Habib (then retired but still used for special assignments such as Mid-East negotiator) have worked this up, and that's what they have in mind for you as your next tour of duty." I

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said, "Wait a minute. I am not going to be an Ambassador during my next tour of duty. I'm going to retire from the Foreign Service at the end of this tour, in just a few months." I said, "They've got to call this appointment off. I appreciate their confidence but I don't want them to expend their political capital on trying to get me a job that I'm not going to accept."

So I talked to Admiral Crowe before he saw Paul Wolfowitz and told him that this was my position. I said that I intended to retire and had long planned to do so. I said that I was flattered by the confidence that they were reposing in me but I didn't want them to pursue this any further because I had no intention of accepting such an appointment. I think that this disappointed Admiral Crowe to some extent but I gave him my reasons. So, on that note, the Department finally recognized that I was, in fact, going to retire, as I had said in writing two years earlier. For some reason no one thought that I was going to do what I had said I planned to do in the letter I had written two years previously. But that was what I intended to do.

I probably should say that my wife Joan was disappointed when she realized that I was serious and that I once again was turning down an opportunity for that level of assignment. She was disappointed that she was not going to have an opportunity to serve as an Ambassador's wife and that I was not going to have an opportunity to serve at a level at which she thought I could have served well. However, I convinced her that I was dead serious and felt that it was time to retire.

Colleagues and friends have often told me that they wondered why I would take such a position. I think that it all started when I was in the career counseling job and I learned how ambitious so many of my colleagues were. I think that I touched on that previously when I described how, shortly after Ambassador Jack Lydman arrived in Kuala Lumpur, his wife Jody was saying, within weeks, that the job which Ambassador Lydman should have had was that of Ambassador to Indonesia. She predicted that he would get that job the next time. (In fact, he never did.) I thought that it was ridiculous for somebody who was

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just starting an ambassadorial assignment to immediately start “lusting” after a greater assignment. That sort of turned me off.

Over the years I watched this process unfold. I had plenty of opportunity to see many of the things that an Ambassador has to do. Frankly, I didn't care for many of them. [Laughter] There is a lot of protocol and a lot of formality to observe. There are many things which an Ambassador is required to do which, to me, were not interesting or fun to do. I thought that a lot of them involved a degree of “puffing yourself up.” These things had no attraction for me, after a while. So I really didn't have to “wring my hands” in considering whether to turn down or accept an ambassadorial appointment. I had made that decision some years before and I have never had any regrets about turning it down and bringing my career to an end when I was 50 years old and, under the regulations, eligible to retire. So I retired on January 3, 1985.

Q: John, do you have any final thoughts about, what, your 30 years in the Foreign Service?

HELBLE: Actually, I served for about 28 years and a few months. It was not as long a career as many Foreign Service Officers experience, but in my view it was a career which I wouldn't change in any way whatsoever. I enjoyed every assignment I ever had and learned a lot from them. I look back on my career with fond memories. No single assignment stands out as “the best.” As I've described them, certain assignments had some elements which made them outstanding in that time frame and in those circumstances. However, no assignment really stands out as “the best.” They were all good.

I think that the Foreign Service is a career which leaves you with the feeling that you have done something for our country, although it's often difficult to pinpoint what you achieved. But you know that you were doing serious work and that you were working hard. You have to believe that, somehow, in its own tiny, microscopic way, your efforts might have helped

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to make a difference on behalf of our country. Certainly, I think that it was a personally rewarding and enriching career, one that my family enjoyed and did not suffer from, in my judgment—and in their view, too. I would like to repeat the experience—but not right now.
[Laughter]

Q: John, thank you very much. I certainly appreciate your making yourself available for this interview.

End of interview